Attrition : its theory and application in German strategy, 1880-1916.

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Attrition:
Its Theory and Application in German Strategy, 1880-1916

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Abstract

"Attrition: Its Theory and Application in German Strategy, 1880-1916" examines the development of the strategy of attrition in German military thought from its inception in the *Strategiestreit* which began in 1880 to its culmination with the battle of Verdun in 1916. "Attrition" traces the reaction of German military intellectuals in the pre-World War I period to this controversial idea put forward by Hans Delbrück, a civilian military historian. Then, it looks at how Delbrück's ideas were refined and put to use by Erich von Falkenhayn, the Chief of the German General Staff, who was forced by circumstances to abandon the tradition German approach to war. "Attrition" examines how Falkenhayn drew upon the experiences of the war to date to produce an operational counterpart to Delbrück's theory at the battle of Verdun in 1916.

Until recently, any history of the German experience in World War I has been hampered by a lack of archival sources. Consequently, it has not received the attention that has been paid to other nations, most notably Great Britain. The discovery of the files of the *Kriegsgeschichtliches Forschungsanstalt*, the organization responsible for writing the German official history of the war, has changed this situation. Contained within these files are many documents previously thought destroyed or lost, and this source will cause all earlier histories of the German experience to be re-examined.

To date, only a limited number of monographs have used this important source. These monographs have generally focused on the relations of the German military leadership with the political leadership, at how "grand strategy" was created. "Attrition," on the other hand, uses these new sources to examine how the German military leadership (Falkenhayn) interacted with subordinates to create a new operational approach, which reacted to the changes in warfare brought on by World War I and which attempted to find a military solution to the stalemate of the trenches.

Acknowledgements

When I began researching this thesis, I was told that doctoral work would be a very lonely undertaking. This, fortunately, has proved to be anything but the case. My research has benefited throughout from the advice and help of many associates and friends, making it very difficult to thank everyone who has contributed to this work. In the first rank must stand my family, without whose support this thesis would never have been possible. Despite sometimes not understanding the work I had undertaken, they have stood by me through what was often a difficult process. My special thanks go to my grandfather, Robert M. Stroker.

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My special thanks go to Dr. Annika Mombauer. In the process of correcting my many misspellings and my occasional lapses of grammar, she helped me develop my ideas, particularly about the pre-war era. My knowledge of Moltke the Younger and the Wilhelmine army benefited greatly from her thoughts. However, not only was she an excellent colleague, she was a good friend to me through some very difficult times. She helped turn a nearly impossible final year into merely a challenge. Without her assistance, this thesis would have taken immeasurably longer to complete.

Finally, I must thank the staff of the various institutions which have assisted me. The inter-library loan staff at the King's College Humanities Library went to great lengths to secure me many obscure titles, without which this thesis would not have been possible. The staff of the Captured German Records collection at the US National Archives and the staff of the Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv, Freiburg, were also extremely helpful during my research trips. Last, the University of London helped make my research possible by providing me with a grant from the Central Research Fund in 1997.

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Abbreviations

AOK:	Armee Oberkommando
BA/MA:	Bundesarchiv, Militärarchiv, Freiburg i.B.
GQG:	Grand Quartier Général
HZ:	Historische Zeitschrift
PJ:	Preußische Jahrbücher
MGM:	Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen
M-W:	Militär-Wochenblatt
MWR:	Militär-Wissenschaftliche Rundschau
OberOst:	Oberbefehlshaber Ost
OHL:	Oberste Heeresleitung
PRO:	Public Record Office, Kew
USNA:	U.S. National Archives, Washington, DC
WWR:	Wehr-Wissenschaftliche Rundschau
WuW:	Wissen und Wehr
ZfpGL:	Zeitschrift für preußische Geschichte und Landeskunde

Introduction

attrition

[ad. L. *attrition -em*, n. of action f. *attrit-*: see ATTRITE and -ION.]
2 b. *Mil.* The wearing down of the enemy's strength and morale by unremitting harassment, esp. in phr. *war of attrition.*

For English-speakers, the term "war of attrition" only entered the language with the outbreak of World War I. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, its first recorded usage was in the British periodical *Sphere* in November 1914, which wrote of the ongoing war on the Continent: "This is a war of attrition, in which each side tries to wear down the other."[1] The long and costly conflict would ensure that the military definition of "attrition" would find a permanent place in English vocabulary. Since World War I, the term "attrition" has come to be associated with senseless slaughter, uninspired generalship, and body counts. Those generals who followed such a strategy, both during the war and since, have been described as "donkeys," "butchers," "bunglers," and worse.[2]

Unlike the Anglophone world, however, the German-speakers began World War I with an understanding of the concept of "war of attrition." For them, the equivalent term, *Ermattungsstrategie* (strategy of attrition), had been in use since 1889, but the idea had been the subject of much acrimonious debate since a decade earlier. Through the course of this debate, the concept of a strategy of attrition had been fully developed by a German academic, Hans Delbrück.[3] Although Delbrück's theory was not widely accepted by

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[1] "The Great European War: Week by Week," The Sphere, 21 November 1914, p.181.
[2] Alan Clark, The Donkeys (London: Hutchinson, 1961); and John Laffin, British Butchers and Bunglers of World War I (Gloucester: Alan Suttin, 1988).
[3] Although Delbrück first used the term *Ermattungsstrategie* to describe the strategy of Frederick the Great only in 1889 (Hans Delbrück, "Die Strategie des Perikles erläutert durch die Strategie Friedrichs des Grossen," Preußische Jahrbücher (Hereafter, PJ) Bd.64 (1889), p.258), the debate over the concept had begun in 1878 with Delbrück's controversial interpretation of Frederick the Great's strategy. See Hans Delbrück, Review of 'Das militärische Testament Friedrichs des Grossen. Herausgegeben und erläutert von v. Taysen, Major im Grossen Generalstabe.' in Zeitschrift für preußische Geschichte und Landeskunde (Hereafter, ZfpGL) 16.Jg. (Jan-Feb 1879) pp. 27-32.

German soldiers before World War I, it provided an intellectual foundation for their conduct of the war after the failure of their strategic plan in 1914. The new Chief of the General Staff, Erich von Falkenhayn, would apply Delbrück's theory when it became clear that the pre-war idea of *Vernichtungsstrategie* had proved bankrupt under the tactical and strategic conditions prevalent in 1914.

It is an understatement to say that World War I has been the subject of much research. As one of the pivotal events in modern history, and perhaps as the most important event in 20th century European history, it has deservedly received much attention from historians. In particular, the events of the battlefield and the strategic designs of the military leaders have come under close scrutiny. However, no study has examined the connection between the ideas formulated by Hans Delbrück on the strategy of attrition in the pre-war period and Germany's conduct of the war under the strategic direction of Erich von Falkenhayn. The purpose of this thesis is to correct this omission by tracing the development of the idea of *Ermattungsstrategie* from the theoretical pennings of Hans Delbrück to the hard realities of the application of Falkenhayn's strategy on the battlefield of Verdun and to place the development of this strategy into the context of the changes in warfare that took place in the late 19th and early 20th century.

* * *

The thesis begins by examining the experience of the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71. While most accounts have focused on the decisive nature of this war, a number of prescient Germans recognized the challenges to the traditional German approach to warfare offered by the French *Volkskrieg*, or people's war, of the second phase of the conflict. The first chapter of this work examines how men such as Helmuth von Moltke the Elder and Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz reacted to what they saw as a fundamental shift in warfare and a true problem for German strategy, represented by the ideas of *Volkskrieg* and "nations in arms."

The second chapter analyses how Hans Delbrück further challenged the accepted military wisdom with his concept of *Ermattungsstrategie*. While Delbrück's writings ostensibly dealt only with historical matters, his questioning of the intellectual

foundations of the army's theory of warfare coincided with the crisis in strategy brought about by the re-emergence of *Volkskrieg*. This link was clearly understood by Delbrück, who applied his historical ideas to contemporary events, and to the army, who were struggling to deal with the challenges offered by modern, increasingly industrial warfare.

Chapter 3 looks at why the army continued to adhere to a strategy that assumed a short war, when the evidence pointed to the difficulties, if not impossibilities, of fighting such a war. The chapter focuses on the impact of Germany's ever changing strategic situation upon the ideas and war plans of Alfred von Schlieffen and his successor Helmuth von Moltke the Younger.

The thesis' second section begins with an analysis of the reaction of the German strategic leadership to the failure of their short-war strategy. With its failure also came the dismissal of Moltke the Younger and the appointment of Erich von Falkenhayn. In Falkenhayn, Germany had found someone who recognized and accepted the changed nature of warfare. Chapter 4 examines how Falkenhayn attempted to reorient German strategy to one approximating Moltke the Elder's and Delbrück's ideas.

Chapters 5 and 6 investigate Falkenhayn's attempts to bring about a negotiated peace with at least one of Germany's enemies during 1915. Moreover, the chapters examine the battlefield lessons this year offered. In addition to an altered strategic situation, Germany's soldiers had to adjust to a new tactical environment – trench warfare, or *Stellungskrieg*. Only by finding a tactical solution to this problem could they reach their strategic goals. The events of 1915 offered ample lessons for Germany's thinking soldiers.

The third section of this thesis examines how Falkenhayn applied the lessons of 1915 to the battlefield in an attempt to find a solution to Germany's strategic and tactical problems. The result was the Battle of Verdun – the battlefield application of the strategy of attrition. Chapter 7 analyzes the development of Falkenhayn's strategy by looking at the planning process for the battle during late 1915 and early 1916. By February 1916, the General Staff Chief had developed a unique strategy which called for the French manpower reserves to be exhausted by "bleeding the French army white" at the fortress of Verdun. This was to be followed by a second German attack, most likely after successfully defending against an Entente relief offensive, which would separate the Western Allies and bring France to the negotiating table.

While most accounts tend to focus exclusively on the Battle of Verdun,[4] this study takes a wider approach; the final two chapters examine both the events on the Meuse and the preparations for the second German offensive. Chapter 8 looks at how the 5th Army attempted to apply the lessons learned from 1915 to fight a battle designed solely to kill as many of the enemy as possible. It demonstrates how Falkenhayn's original tactical and operational ideas changed as the conditions of the battle altered. The final chapter looks at Falkenhayn's plan for the second offensive and how the much-desired Entente relief offensive actually resulted in the attrition of Germany's army and the end of Germany's dalliance with this strategy.

* * *

While both Hans Delbrück's theory of attrition and Erich von Falkenhayn's conduct of World War I have been the subject of much scholarly interest, this study is unique in looking at the development of the concept from Delbrück's theory to Falkenhayn's practice. An examination of the pre-war theory has offered few problems to researchers.[5] Delbrück's private papers still exist and his ideas are well represented by his voluminous writings. This study, however, has made use of an under-utilized source – Delbrück's columns in his journal, Preußische Jahrbücher. These show very clearly the links drawn by Delbrück from the historical examples of the 18th century to the realities of the early 20th century, and how Delbrück envisioned his theories being applied in contemporary affairs.[6]

Research into Falkenhayn's application of the concept of attrition has proved more problematic. Until recently, it has been thought that writing a thorough history of Germany's military operations during the First World War would be impossible.[7] This is due to the fact that the main archives of the Prussian/German army were largely

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[4] Recent examples of this include, Alistair Horne, The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916 (London: Penguin Books, 1993; originally published, 1962); and German Werth, Verdun: Die Schlacht und der Mythos (Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 1989).

[5] For excellent accounts of the *Strategiestreit*, see Arden Bucholz, Hans Delbrück and the German Military Establishment (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1985); and Sven Lange, Hans Delbrück und der Strategiestreit: Kriegführung und Kriegsgeschichte in der Kontroverse 1879-1914 (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, 1995).

[6] Adren Bucholz has recently edited and translated a number of Delbrück's columns in Delbrück's Modern Military History (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997). However, he fails to make clear the connection between these essays and the *Strategiestreit*.

destroyed during an Allied bombing raid on Potsdam in 1945. Research from primary sources about the German side of the war was restricted to those archives which had survived the destruction of zealous censors and the Second World War.[8] These tended to be political or archives of the smaller states of Germany (Bavaria, Württemberg, etc.), which held little of value to those historians looking for the decisions taken by Germany's strategic leaders regarding battlefield operations. The nature of these archives, along with the changing idea of military history, has meant that accounts of the German side of the war have focused primarily on the political realm, rather than on military operations.[9]

The loss of the bulk of the army's archive has indeed caused difficulties in writing a comprehensive account of Germany's conduct of the war. However, this thesis has been greatly aided by several important sources, which make possible a fresh examination of Germany's military operations during World War I. The most important of these sources are the files of the German army archive which have recently come to light after the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe.[10]

In 1988, the Soviets returned to East Germany some 40 tons of documents that had been seized by the Red Army at the end of World War II and kept in secret archives in the Soviet Union ever since. Included in the material returned were 3,000 Prussian and German army files thought destroyed in the Allied bombing raid on Potsdam in 1945. At the heart of this material are the files of the section of the Reichsarchiv responsible for

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[7] For a recent example of this belief, see Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, Passchendaele: The Untold Story (London: Yale University Press, 1996) p.219.

[8] For German efforts to destroy sensitive material, see Holger Herwig, "Clio Deceived: Patriotic Self-Censorship in Germany after the Great War," International Security Vol.12 Nr.2 (Fall 1987) pp. 262-301.

[9] Falkenhayn's tenure as Chief of the General Staff has, indeed, been relatively well researched. See Karl-Heinz Janßen, Der Kanzler und der General: Die Führungskrise um Bethmann Hollweg und Falkenhayn (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1967); Heinz Kraft, Staatsräson and Kriegsführung in kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914-1916: Der Gegensatz zwischen dem Generalstabschef von Falkenhayn und dem Oberbefehlshaber Ost im Rahmen des Bündniskrieges der Mittelmächte (Frankfurt: Muster-Schmidt Verlag, 1980); and Holger Afflerbach, Falkenhayn: Politsches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 1994). Each of these works is largely focused on Falkenhayn's political role, rather than his role in military operations.

[10] Afflerbach made extensive use of these files in his biography, as did Annika Mombauer in her study of Moltke the Younger, Helmuth von Moltke and the German General Staff: Military and Political Decision-Making in Imperial Germany, 1906-1916 (University of Sussex, DPhil Thesis, 1997). Holger Herwig has also made limited use of them in his The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918 (London: Arnold, 1997).

the writing of the German official history of the war, the *Kriegsgeschichtliches Forschungsanstalt des Heeres* (Army Research Institute for Military History).[11]

Founded in 1919, the Reichsarchiv was initially headed by the last *Oberquartiermeister* of the *Historische Abteilung* of the General Staff, *Generalmajor* Hermann Ritter Mertz von Quirnheim.[12] The organization had a two-fold task. First, it was to collect and organize archival material of the *Kaiserreich* and to construct a history of the recently lost war. To accomplish this, it was divided into four departments, an archival department and three sections responsible for economic, political, and military history.[13] The second task of the Reichsarchiv was to provide a cover for the continued work of the banned *Historische Abteilung* of the General Staff.[14] As such, the Reichsarchiv had a very pronounced military flavor; of its 65 members, 52 were active or retired officers.[15]

To accomplish the task of writing the official history of the war, the KGFA collected, in addition to the official records of the army, copies of private diaries and testimonies of important figures in the war, which were used to elaborate the official records. For instance, the KGFA obtained from *Generaloberst* Hans von Plessen, the commander of the Imperial headquarters, a typescript copy of his personal diary kept throughout the conflict. These, and many other similar sources, can be found in the files now stored in the Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv in Freiburg im Breisgau.[16]

Another important source contained within these files are the various papers generated by the writing of Der Weltkrieg. The KGFA had a set methodology to which its writers worked. First, sources relevant to the subject at hand would be collected together into a "*Materialsammlung*." This collection would include extracts from

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[11] The material was originally returned to the East German authorities in December 1988. With the unification of Germany in 1989, the material became available to western scholars. It was kept in Potsdam until 1993, when it was moved to the Bundesarchiv/Militärarchiv in Freiburg. See Uwe Löbel, "Neue Forschungsmöglichkeiten zur preussisch-deutschen Heeresgeschichte: Zur Rückgabe von Akten des Potsdamer Heeresarchiv durch die Sowjetunion," Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen (Hereafter, MGM) 51 (1992) pp. 143-149; and Helmut Otto, "Der Bestand Kriegsgeschichtliche Forschungsanstalt des Heeres im Bundesarchiv-, Militärisches Zwischenarchiv Potsdam," MGM 51 (1992) pp. 429-441.

[12] Mertz held this position until 1931, when he was replaced by Hans von Haeften, until then the director of the military history section of the Reichsarchiv. Wolfgang Foerster took over upon Haeften's death in 1937 and maintained this post until the end of World War II. See Otto, op.cit., pp. 430-432.

[13] Concerning this task, see Mertz' forward to Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg 1914-1918 Bd.1: Die Grenzschlachten im Westen (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1925) pp. vii-x.

[14] Bucholz, Delbrück, p.144; Mombauer, op.cit., p.10.

[15] Bucholz, Delbrück, p.142; Otto, op.cit., p.430.

documents such as orders, *Kriegstagebücher*, and post-war testimonies. From this *Materialsammlung*, the writers would construct a "*Forschungsarbeit*" which would be a rough narrative with long extracts from key documents. In the *Forschungsarbeiten* analysis was kept to a minimum; priority was placed on reconstructing the course of events and actions of the various commands. When completed, these works were then circulated within the Reichsarchiv and sometimes to important participants for comments. Only after the writers were confident that all relevant sources had been examined did they proceed from the *Forschungsarbeit* to writing drafts for Der Weltkrieg; it was within this final stage that the writer's historical analysis was added.

Although unfortunately few *Materialsammlungen* have survived, many *Forschungsarbeiten* have, and these have provided an important source for extracts from documents which were destroyed in April 1945. Additionally, the comments of the readers of these works often provide crucial testimony of individuals who played central roles in the war. Although these works cannot fully replace the original material lost during World War II, they go a long way towards giving researchers a more complete picture of the development of German operations during the war. While historians of Germany's war effort have had to rely mainly upon archives which provided information about the relationship of Germany's military and political leaders, the resurfacing of the KGFA material provides researchers with a source from which to examine the planning, decisions, and actions of Germany's military leadership.

This thesis has also made extensive use of the final product of the KGFA's work – Der Weltkrieg 1914-1918: Die militärischen Operationen zu Lande.[17] This 14-volume series is an invaluable and often overlooked source for the war's operational events. Der Weltkrieg is an excellent example of traditional military history. It provides perhaps the

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[16] A copy of Plessen's *Tagebuch* is spread through a number of files in the archive. The period 18 August to 10 October 1914 is in BA/MA, W10/51063 and the period 14 October 1914 to 29 August 1916 is in BA/MA, W10/50656.

[17] Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg 1914-1918: Die militärischen Operationen zu Lande 14 vols. (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1925-1944); and Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg 1914-1918: Kriegsrüstung und Kriegswirtschaft 2 vols. (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1930). Several other series came out in the Interwar period under the auspices of the Reichsarchiv, but these were usually written by former officers not directly associated with the Reichsarchiv. These were the Forschungen und Darstellungen aus dem Reichsarchiv (7 volumes), the Schlachten des Weltkrieges (38 volumes), and the Erinnerungsblätter deutscher Regimenter (250 volumes). See Hans von Haeften, draft of a letter dated 20 August 1928, in Haeften Nachlass, BA/MA, N35/24; and Erich Murawski, "Die amtliche deutsche Kriegsgeschichtsschreibung über den Ersten Weltkrieg," Wehrwissenschaftliche Rundschau (Hereafter, WWR) Jg.9 (1959) pp. 513-531 and pp. 584-598.

most detailed and the most authoritative narrative of Germany's land war.[18] However, as a source it is not without its problems. As Annika Mombauer has noted, its writers had a clear political purpose – to provide evidence that would support Germany's rejection of the "war guilt" clause of the Treaty of Versailles.[19] Moreover, and perhaps more importantly for this study, the work was written largely by former General Staff officers and was intended to be a source from which Germany's soldiers could learn. As such, it is often prescriptive rather than purely descriptive, and it reflects the strategic ideas of its authors.[20]

This brings us to Der Weltkrieg's most significant problem, at least for this thesis. The writing of Der Weltkrieg was entrusted to the Reichsarchiv, which as we have seen above took over many of the duties of the *Historische Abteilung* of the now proscribed General Staff. Accordingly, most of its researchers were former General Staff officers, many of whom had very pronounced view on how the war should have been fought. The first seven volumes of Der Weltkrieg were written under the direction of Hans von Haeften.[21] During the war, Haeften had been one of the strongest supporters of Erich Ludendorff and his idea of *Vernichtungsstrategie*. As such, he was one of Falkenhayn's most bitter opponents. Indeed, during the war, he had actively worked to have the General Staff Chief removed and replaced with Ludendorff.[22] After the war, Haeften brought his wartime beliefs to the writing of the official history.[23] In addition to Haeften, who as editor of Der Weltkrieg had the most impact on the interpretations contained within the work, the president of the Reichsarchiv, Mertz, was a wartime opponent of

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[18] Prior and Wilson's assertion that Der Weltkrieg is flawed because it was "written entirely during the Nazi period" is patently false. Eight of the 14 volumes were published before the Nazi seizure of power, and volume 9 was largely completed. Further, the files of the KGFA indicate that the Nazis had little influence over the writing of remainder of the work. Prior and Wilson, op.cit., p.219.

[19] Mombauer, op.cit., pp. 8-10.

[20] In this, the Reichsarchiv was following a long German tradition. See Arden Bucholz, Moltke Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning (Providence, RI: Berg, 1991) for a discussion of the writing of history in the German army.

[21] Otto, op.cit., p.430.

[22] Ekkehart Guth, "Der Gegensatz zwischen dem Oberbefehlshaber Ost und dem Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres 1914/15: Die Rolle des Majors von Haeften im Spannungsfeld zwischen Hindenburg, Ludendorff und Falkenhayn," MGM 1/84 pp. 75-111.

[23] For the most blatant example of this, see the transcript of a planning meeting for Band VIII of Der Weltkrieg in which Haeften said the volume should proceed from the assumption that Falkenhayn's strategy "... had led us to catastrophe." "Protokoll über die Besprechung bei Herrn General von Haeften am 6.Dezember 1930," BA/MA, W10/51408.

Falkenhayn.[24] The result of this was a bias against Falkenhayn and his strategic ideas throughout the official history.[25]

The Reichsarchiv was not alone in its criticism of Falkenhayn's strategy. The post-war period saw a bizarre renascence of Schlieffen studies, which attempted to demonstrate that if Germany had only followed the teachings of its former Chief of the General Staff (as these "teachings" were interpreted by a select number of Schlieffen's "disciples"), then the war would have ended in a German victory.[26] Those who had deviated from Schlieffen's ideas, such as Moltke the Younger and Falkenhayn, were castigated, and any strategy other than *Vernichtungsstrategie* was considered a false path. Even more than the Reichsarchiv work, this literature was prescriptive in nature, as these authors tried to inculcate a new generation of German officers with the "proper" operational and strategic ideas, which would prevent a repeat of the indecisiveness of World War I.[27]

With such an authoritative work as Der Weltkrieg biased against Falkenhayn and his concept of *Ermattungsstrategie* and the other criticism of this strategy after the war, it is hardly surprising that a good deal of the secondary literature has continued along this path. With the advent of new source material, however, Falkenhayn's decisions and operational ideas can be examined anew, without the bias of his contemporaries, and the following study will put his strategy into the context it deserves.

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[24] Mertz had served from 1914 to 1916 as the first general staff officer (Ia) of Kronprinz Rupprecht's 6th Army. Rupprecht and his staff played a key role in undermining Falkenhayn's position as Chief of the General Staff. Mertz brought these wartime grudges with him to his post-war position. See Mertz to Foerster, 4 January 1935, BA/MA, W10/51523. Mertz was succeeded as president by Haeften in 1931.

[25] This bias was noticed by many former officers who commented on drafts of the Reichsarchiv's work. For example see, Eugen Ritter von Zoellner to Reichsarchiv, 10 June 1930, BA/MA, W10/51305; and Hermann von Kuhl to Reichsarchiv, 7 January 1934, BA/MA, W10/51523.

[26] Wilhelm Groener, an important officer in the General Staff during the war and Reichswehrminister after the war, was the most prominent member of this group. See his Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1930); and Feldherr wider Willen: Operative Studien über den Weltkrieg (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1931). The beliefs of the "Schlieffen School" were also conveyed in the memoirs of some of the war's key participants. For example, see Max Bauer, Der grosse Krieg in Feld und Heimat (Tübingen: Osiander'sche Buchhandlung, 1921); and Max Hoffmann, Die Aufzeichnungen des Generalmajors Max Hoffmann (ed. Karl-Friedrich Nowak) (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1929).

[27] This aim was freely admitted by Groener, who wrote of his works, "Ich schreibe nicht für Historie, obschon natürlich für sie auch eine Quelle in meinem Büchern fliesst, ich schreibe für die Zukunft, weil ich fürchte, unsere Hohlköpfe werden im nächsten Krieg die Strategie ebenso verballhornen, wie es im Weltkrieg geschehen ist." Groener to Gerold von Gleich, 16 May 1935, quoted in Wilhelm Groener Lebenserinnerungen (ed. Friedrich Frhr. Hiller von Gaertringen) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957) p.16.

Part One:
Pre-War German Military Thought

Introduction

In a lecture to the *Militärische Gesellschaft* in Berlin in 1888, Major August Keim of the *Kriegsakademie* gave his view of German military thinking near the close of the 19th century. To Keim, his army's approach towards military education and thinking was one of intellectual openness that challenged past views of war. He spoke of how poorly commanded and thought out German maneuvers and war plans would appear to the generals of Prussia's past. Were Duke Ferdinand of Brunswick to inspect the German plan of operations for the Franco-Prussian War, declared Major Keim, he would in all probability "find little satisfaction in a plan of campaign, according to the views of his time, so thoroughly unscientific and inadequate." If General von Saldern, Frederick the Great's drillmaster, were to see the German maneuvers of 1888, he "would shake his head at the decay in tactics, over the complete lack of the finer comprehension of the true tactical art, which certainly, [to von Saldern] consisted principally in permitting the genius for drill to shine in complex forms." Keim saw the negative impressions of past Prussian masters to be an indication of progress within the German army. To Keim, the orthodoxies of the day had constantly to be questioned in an effort to keep the German army ahead of its opponents, and the army should be kept free of all rigid tactical and strategic schemes. In the conclusion of his opening remarks, Keim hoped that "at the end of the next century" the German approach to preparing for war would be judged favorably.[1]

Towards the end of the "next" century, historian Martin Kitchen published an article examining German strategic thinking of the 19th century. Keim's hopes were to be

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[1] [August] Keim, "Kriegslehre und Kriegführung. Vortrag, gehalten in der Militärischen Gesellschaft zu Berlin am 12 Dezember 1888," Beiheft zum Militär-Wochenblatt 1.H. (1889) pp.1-2. Keim, a sometime journalist, later became one of Waldersee's "pen hussars." After retiring from the army as a *Generalmajor*, he continued his political bent by becoming a leading member of the *Flottenverein* and later founding the nationalistic *Deutsche Wehrverein*.

dashed by Kitchen, who did not judge him and his colleagues favorably. Kitchen denied that the German army possessed the very attribute of which Keim was so proud – intellectual openness. He wrote, "the development of German strategic thought is marked by a slow hardening of a subtle dialectical approach to military problems into a set of unchallenged axioms."[2] From Carl von Clausewitz in the beginning of the 19th century to Alfred Graf von Schlieffen at the end of the century, the German approach to war had become more rigid and obsessed with purely military thinking, ignoring the changes in warfare that had occurred over the previous century. The German strategic thinkers, with Schlieffen being Kitchen's prime example, believed that the uncertainties could be removed from war if only enough planning was put in before war's outbreak. "In pursuit of a perfect strategic plan," he wrote, "general staff officers pored over railway timetables, examined production figures of industry, undertook countless exercises and manoeuvres, and produced reams of memoranda."[3] The result was an "infallible key" to success – the Schlieffen Plan, a purely military solution to Germany's strategic situation. The Schlieffen Plan was based on principles which its author believed were constant, and thus provided Germany with a recipe for success. These principles, particularly encirclement and annihilation, in Kitchen's eyes, became the philosopher's stone of the German military, who permitted no questioning of their beliefs from within.

Martin Kitchen's view that the *Kaiserheer* was actually dogmatic and doctrinaire, and not intellectually open as Keim believed, echoes much of the literature concerning German army before World War I, most notably the writings of Gerhard Ritter and Jehuda L. Wallach, and can be considered the general view of historians today.[4] The most prominent histories of the *Kaiserheer* focus on the General Staff and its head, and the origins of Germany's failed strategy are found in the teachings of Alfred von Schlieffen, chief of the GGS from 1891 to 1905 and author of the infamous plan which bears his name. Gerhard Ritter in his classic study of the Schlieffen Plan wrote of Schlieffen as a

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[2] Martin Kitchen, "The Traditions of German Strategic Thought," The International History Review, 1/ 2 (April 1979), p.163.
[3] Ibid., p.170.
[4] There have, however, been some attempts to revise this thesis. For example see Dennis Showalter, "German Grand Strategy: A Contradiction in Terms?," MGM 2/90 pp. 65-102; Antulio J. Echevarria II, "Borrowing from the Master: Use of Clausewitz in German Military Literature before the Great War,"

"pure technician" who ignored the political implications of his war plan and thus sowed the seeds of Germany's defeat.[5] Jehuda Wallach traced the origins of the "dogma of the battle of annihilation," which kept German soldiers blind to other strategies, back to Schlieffen.[6] To the followers of this wing of historiography, the German army was solely obsessed with annihilating its enemies in great decisive battles and in achieving rapid victories.

The following three chapters will show this view to be an oversimplification of German military thinking in the years before World War I. While there is some truth in the opinions of Ritter, Wallach, and Kitchen, the Imperial German army defies such easy answers. Even Alfred von Schlieffen, who indeed at first glance seems to be the archetypal narrow-minded strategist, was more complex than portrayed by the above historians. Moreover, Schlieffen was but one of many strategic thinkers in Wilhelmine Germany, and, at the time, perhaps one of the least known.[7] By focusing narrowly on the General Staff and their plans, these authors have neglected other important streams of thought within the German army. After 1871, the German military journals were awash in debates over strategy and tactics.[8] Indeed, as one perceptive historian has noted, the volume of German military literature that appeared from 1870 to 1914 is so great that "to wade through the flood of technical and theoretical literature that appeared after 1870 could easily consume the worst years of one's life."[9] However, it is precisely within this "flood" of literature we find the debates which foreshadowed the changes in German strategy and tactics within World War I.

Therefore, this section will look at areas of debate often ignored by historians of Germany's General Staff. Chapter 1 will examine German interpretations of the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War – the *Volkskrieg* – particularly the war plans of

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War in History Vol 3 No.3 (1996); Stig Förster, "Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges, 1871-1914. Metakritik eines Mythos," MGM 54 (1995) pp. 61-95.

[5] Gerhard Ritter, The Schlieffen Plan: A Critique of a Myth (London: Oswald Wolff, 1958).

[6] Jehuda L. Wallach, The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986).

[7] Indeed, Rudolph von Caemmerer, in his influential book, Die Entwicklung der strategischen Wissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert (Berlin: Wilhelm Baensch, 1904), never mentions Schlieffen.

[8] Already by 1859, the Germans produced 50% of the military literature in Europe. Samuel P. Huntington, The Soldier and the State (London: Harvard University Press, 1994; originally published 1957) p. 48.

[9] Jay Luvaas, "European Military Thought and Doctrine, 1870-1914," in Michael Howard, ed. The Theory and Practice of War (London: Cassell & Co., 1965) p.71.

Helmuth von Moltke the Elder and the writings of several historians of the war. Chapter 2 will look at Hans Delbrück's controversial ideas about the historical origins of, and the continuing role of, *Ermattungsstrategie* and the debate which these ideas caused with the German military. Chapter 3 will return to the military and attempt to explain the reasons behind the military's rejection of Moltke the Elder's warnings about *Volkskrieg* and their rejection of Delbrück's strategic ideas, which ultimately resulted in their continued adherence to *Vernichtungsstrategie*.

Chapter One:
The *Volkskrieg* in German Military Thought

In 1817, in an essay dedicated to his mentor Gerhard von Scharnhorst, Carl von Clausewitz described the radical change in warfare brought about by the French Revolution. He wrote:

> Now war stepped forth in all its raw violence....War was returned to the people, who to some extent had been separated from it by professional standing armies; war cast off its shackles and crossed the bounds of what had once seemed possible.[1]

Clausewitz discerned clearly the shift from professional, dynastic armies of the 18th century to the people's armies of the Revolutionary period. The Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars showed to the world the terrible destructiveness that nations could inflict upon other nations when the passions of the people became involved. The architects of the peace which followed the victory over Napoleon were anxious to put the genie of nationalism and its concomitant people's army back into the bottle. In this goal, the powers of reaction were largely victorious. Of the European powers, only Prussia retained short-term conscription, and even in Prussia this was not fully implemented.[2] Through most of Europe, armies were once again small and beholden not to the people but to their monarchs.

Thanks in large part to the efforts of the participants in the Congress of Vienna, the 19th century was one of relative peace in Europe. The few wars that occurred remained local and did not engage the passions of the masses. European wars had once again become *Kabinettskriege* rather than *Volkskriege*. The armies of Europe, including Germany's, took this political situation to be the norm and created strategies to fit this system. The experience of the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War, though, reawakened the European powers to the potency of a "nation in arms." The consequences

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[1] Carl von Clausewitz, "On the Life and Character of Scharnhorst," Historical and Political Writings. (trans. Peter Paret and Daniel Moran) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) p.102.

of this shift were, however, not widely comprehended by soldiers who were focused on fighting and winning campaigns rather than wars.

Indeed, the German Wars of Unification, with their great battles of annihilation, suggested to many that future wars would be fought and concluded in the same fashion. As recent historiography has clearly shown, many German military intellectuals formed their ideas based upon the assumption that future wars would be won quickly through one or a few great battles.[3] Alfred Graf von Schlieffen is probably the prime example of this school of thought, and this idea found its expression in his war plans, which called for Germany to defeat her enemies in what amounted to one great battle. However, there were a number of German military intellectuals who held opposing views, which have until recently been ignored by historians.[4]

The same experience that had led to the expectation (or illusion as it is often called) of a short war amongst German military intellectuals, also led to the foundation of another school of thought that at least questioned this comfortable assumption and ultimately provided German soldiers with alternative strategic ideas during World War I. While most German commentators on strategy before World War I looked to the Austro-Prussian War and the first half of the Franco-Prussian War for their inspiration, some viewed the second half of the Franco-Prussian War, with its *Volkskrieg*, as more important, and perhaps a better model of future war. These observers saw that the conditions would not always be right for a short war based on a strategy of annihilation (*Vernichtungsstrategie*), favoured by most of the military. Instead, the campaigns against the hastily raised armies of the French Republic in the winter of 1870/71 pointed to a slow, drawn-out war, one without spectacular, decisive battles.

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[2] In 1824, the term of service in France was extended to 8 years. The Habsburg Empire followed suit in 1845, while in Russia, peasant soldiers served 15-year terms. The Prussia, on the other hand, retained the 3-year term of service introduced during the Napoleonic period.

[3] See Jehuda Wallach, The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986); Gunther Rothenberg, "Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment," in Peter Paret, ed. Makers of Modern Strategy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) pp. 32-63; L.L. Farrar, Jr., The Short War Illusion: German Policy, Strategy and Domestic Affairs August-December 1914 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-Clio, 1973).

[4] See Stig Förster, "Facing 'People's War': Moltke the Elder and Germany's Military Options after 1871," Journal of Strategic Studies Vol.10 Nr.2 (1987) pp. 209-230; and Idem, "Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges, 1871-1914. Metakritik eines Mythos," MGM 54 (1995) pp. 61-95.

The Volkskrieg *in France, 1870-1871*

On the morning of 2 September 1870, General de Wimpffen surrendered the Army of Châlons to the Germans at Sedan. For the loss of 9,000 men, the German army captured over 100,000 Frenchmen and the Emperor Napoleon III himself. With the Army of the Rhine trapped in the fortress of Metz, the majority of the Imperial French army had been rendered *hors de combat* within 6 weeks of mobilization. By conventional reckoning, the Franco-Prussian War was over, won stunningly by the German forces.[5] The battles of this period, particularly Sedan and Metz, were viewed by the world as spectacular successes and entered German mythology as quintessential battles of annihilation.

However, with the surrender of Napoleon III came also the collapse of the Imperial government, which was replaced by the radical *Gouvernement de la défense nationale* on 4 September. Quickly this new government decided to continue the war, despite its many handicaps. To the German peace offer (with its demand for Alsace/Lorraine), they replied: "There can be no answer to such insolent demands but a *guerre à outrance*."[6] Within the next several months, the French went about mobilizing their nation for war. In mid-September portions of the government evacuated the threatened Paris for the provinces, where the government was re-constituted. On 14 October, an order went out to the provinces threatened with German occupation: All bridges, railways, and telegraphs were to be destroyed before being allowed into enemy hands; similarly any material which might be useful to the invaders was to be evacuated to a safe area. A series of calls to arms culminated on 2 November when a *levée en masse* was declared: All able-bodied men aged 21 to 40 were drafted into service.[7]

The efforts of the Government of National Defense produced astounding results. After the investment of Paris, the French army in metropolitan France, including active elements, troops in depots, the National Guard, and the *franc-tireurs* numbered some

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[5] On the German difficulties toward finding peace see Eberhard Kolb, "Der Schwierige Weg zum Frieden: Das Problem der Kriegsbeendigung 1870/71," Historische Zeitschrift 241.Bd. (1985) pp. 51-79.
[6] Quoted in Michael Howard, The Franco-Prussian War (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961) p.222. Howard's work remains the standard English-language treatment of the war.
[7] French mobilization is covered in detail in numerous sources, including: Howard, op.cit., pp. 233-256; and William Serman, "French Mobilization in 1870," in Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler, eds. On the Road to Total War. (Washington: Cambridge University Press, 1997) pp. 283-294.

7,000 officers and 494,000 men.[8] By 5 February 1871, the French army had increased by more than 400,000 men to a strength of some 950, 200.[9] These men were equipped from existing stocks of weapons and supplemented by importing arms from abroad. Within the space of several months, the Government of National Defense under the direction of the minister of the interior, Leon Gambetta, had reconstituted a French army, quite literally raising new armies from the ground.

Despite the impressive appearance of these figures on paper, the newly formed French armies had serious shortcomings. First, they lacked trained officers. Relatively few Imperial officers survived the destruction of their army. Retired officers and those coming from Algeria could only go a short way to meeting this deficit. Training suffered accordingly, as did leadership in battle. Even the remnants of the Imperial Army who had survived its destruction at Sedan and Metz had only received a month or so of training. Additionally, the new French armies lacked the artillery required for modern war, which proved a severe handicap when fighting the professional, well-equipped German armies.[10]

By sheer numbers, though, the new French armies were able to cause the Germans considerable difficulties. Moltke was forced to dispatch large numbers of troops to hunt down the new French armies, as well as maintain the siege of Paris and the numerous sieges of other French garrisons to his rear. *Franc-tireurs* kept large numbers of German troops occupied guarding lines of communication.[11] German manpower was stretched to the limit.[12] The French had turned the tables on the Germans, who had won the first phase of the war in large degree due to their superior numbers. However, the German superiority in training and organization told against the French in the end. The

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[8] Archivrat Greiner, "Der *Volkskrieg* in der zweiten Häfte des Krieges 1870/71" unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10-50203, p. 9. This manuscript is part of a larger work written in the 1920s to examine the prospects of a German *Volkskrieg*. The Interwar period saw a renewed interest in improvised and militia armies on the part of the Reichswehr. For examples see, Hugo Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven, "Das preussische Volk in Waffen der Befreiungskriege," WuW Jg. 1924 pp. 30-36; and Hermann Balck, "1813. Ein Feldzug mit improvisierten Heeren," WuW Jg. 1932 pp. 505-522.

[9] Greiner, op.cit., p.16.

[10] See Howard, op.cit., pp. 299-317, pp. 397-406.

[11] Some 110,000 men alone were used just to guard lines of communication from Germany. Howard, op.cit., pp. 277-278. For the French partisan campaign see, Georg Cardinal von Widdern, Deutsch-französischer Krieg 1870-1871: Der Krieg an den rückwärtigen Verbindungen der deutschen Heere und der Etappendienst (6 vols) (Berlin: R.Eisenschmidt, 1893-99).

[12] Julius Verdy du Vernois, Im Großen Hauptquartier 1870/71 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1895) pp. 229-231. The German manpower problem has not been the subject of much detailed research. The best source remains, Gustav Lehmann, Die Mobilmachung von 1870/71 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1905).

improvised armies, though they bought some months, could not in the end prevent the fall of Paris and with it peace on German terms.

Moltke's Response

Perhaps not surprisingly, it was the victor of Königgrätz and Sedan, the intellectual father of the *Kaiserheer*, who was disturbed most by the campaign against Gambetta's improvised armies. It was Moltke who was faced with formulating a strategy to defeat an amorphous foe shortly after his spectacular victories over the Imperial French army. It was Moltke who had to bear the strain of conducting operations against armies to the north, south, and to his rear, as well as supervise the siege of Paris. Moltke realized quite clearly the shift in warfare represented by the war's second phase and the consequences this had for future wars: While he labelled the Austro-Prussian War a "*Kabinettskrieg*" fought purely "for an ideal end – the establishment of power,"[13] he labelled the Franco-Prussian War a "*Volkskrieg*." After this war, he wrote:

> The days are gone by when, for dynastical ends, small armies of professional soldiers went to war to conquer a city, or a province, and then sought winter quarters or made peace. The wars of the present day call whole nations to arms .... The entire financial resources of the State are appropriated to military purposes...

Moltke realized clearly that such wars would be "more terrible" than wars of the past, but hoped that they would occur less frequently.[14]

Indeed, as early as 1867, Moltke had recognized the difficulties in waging a war against France. In a *Denkschrift* of this year, he wrote: "Even if the French were to lose a battle on their own territory, it would never cause them to conclude peace; rather their patriotism would cause them to summon up all the strength of their resource-rich land."[15] Once war had broken out in 1870, however, his early victories led him to hope for a speedy conclusion to the war. By December, though, frustrated by Gambetta's armies, he began to despair of concluding peace quickly and began instead to make preparations for a long war which would take the German army into the south of France and break once

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[13] Helmuth Graf von Moltke, "Ueber den angeblichen Kriegsrat in den Kriegen König Wilhelms I.," reprinted in The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 (trans. Archibald Forbes) (London: Harper & Brothers, 1907) p.417. Rudolf Stadelmann wrote that this document, written in 1880, could be considered Moltke's "Military-Political Testament." Moltke und der Staat (Krefeld: Scherpe Verlag, 1950) p.173.
[14] Moltke, The Franco-German War, p.1.
[15] Quoted in Stadelmann, op.cit., p.260.

and for all her powers of resistance.[16] In early December, his headquarters had begun planning for an increase in the German army of 100 reserve battalions.[17] He wrote to a friend on 18 December that he could not foresee how long such a campaign would last, and warned that "a whole people under arms should not be underestimated..."[18]

The continued resistance of the French after the battles of Sedan and Metz and the encirclement of Paris had led Moltke to decide that the only recourse was to fight to the end against the French people, to fight an "*Exterminationskrieg*," which would settle once and for all the great Franco-German rivalry. In early January, Moltke expressed his frustration and outlined his thoughts to Kronprinz Friedrich Wilhelm: He saw the impending fall of Paris not as the end of the war, but rather as an opportunity to free troops to take the war deep into the French provinces. Convinced that the French would not give up until completely crushed, Moltke declared: "We must fight this nation of liars to the very end! Then we can dictate whatever peace we like."[19] As Moltke now believed France would fight on until the last of her resources, the task of the German army became to destroy or neutralize these resources.[20]

Moltke's decision to conduct a "war of extermination" met with resistance from the German leadership. Bismarck, despite some nasty rhetoric, stayed firm on his course for a swift conclusion to the war. This divergence of views between Moltke and Bismarck played a role in the well-documented split between the two which required the intervention of Kaiser Wilhelm I to solve.[21] Bismarck was not alone, however, in his resistance to Moltke's views. Even the Minister of War, Albrecht von Roon, balked at the prospects of prolonging the conflict and the further manpower and economic demands which this course would necessitate. As early as 20 August, Roon was already

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[16] Ibid., pp. 244-245

[17] Paul Bronsart von Schellendorf, Geheimes Kriegstagebuch 1870-1871 (ed. Peter Rassow) (Bonn: Athenäum-Verlag, 1954) pp. 212-213. This increase met with opposition from the Minister of War, Albrecht von Roon, and created tension between his and Moltke's staffs. Bronsart, Moltke's chief of operations, joked it would be better for Germany if they traded Roon for Gambetta! See also Eberhard Kessel, Moltke (Stuttgart: KF Koehler Verlag, 1957) pp. 575-576.

[18] Moltke to Privy Councillor Schiller, in Helmuth Graf von Moltke, Gesammelte Schriften und Denkwürdigkeiten Vol 5. (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1891) p.179.

[19] Quoted in Howard, op.cit., pp. 436-437. See also Emperor Frederick III, The War Diary of Emperor Frederick III, 1870-71, (trans. & ed. A.R. Allinson) (London: Stanley Paul, 1927) p.253, p.257.

[20] Thus, Moltke too bears some responsibility for the shift from *Kabinettskrieg* to *Volkskrieg*. This point is drawn clearly by Förster in "Facing 'People's War," pp. 213-214.

[21] See Gerhard Ritter, The Sword and the Scepter Vol. 1: The Prussian Tradition 1740-1890 (trans. Heinz Norden) (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1969), pp. 219-223; Stadelmann, op.cit., pp. 212-250; Kessel, op.cit., pp. 581-592.

complaining about the difficulty in finding replacements for fallen officers.[22] Later, in a comment to one of Moltke's letters, Roon wrote that he felt it best to return the Landwehr troops to Germany after the fall of Paris and that, "a strategy which leads us to the foot of the Pyrénées is a task for years if we are not to over-tax our strength."[23]

In the end, Bismarck's point of view prevailed. With the fall of Paris came the end of the Franco-Prussian War, and with it, according to Moltke's biographer Rudolf Stadelmann, a great disappointment for Moltke, who had wanted "to direct the Franco-Prussian War as a war of extermination because he had hoped to settle unilaterally a 100-year-old rivalry."[24] With France not definitively defeated, Moltke soon began to fear that a chance such as the Franco-Prussian War would never come again. He believed that France would learn quickly the lessons of her defeat and reconstitute rapidly her armies. By ending the war before Moltke could achieve his expanded goals, the war had, in his eyes, made France stronger rather than weaker in the long run.

Moltke, and Bismarck as well, reckoned that France would never accept the loss of her two provinces and would look for an opportunity to take them back. Therefore, while Bismarck concentrated on keeping France diplomatically isolated, Moltke planned for possible war. In his deployment plan of 1871, Moltke believed he could achieve another rapid victory against France's army. The French, however, learned quickly from their defeat, and Moltke watched with trepidation the rapid rebuilding of their army. The French quickly introduced effective conscription to bring their army up to the level of the German.[25] By 1873, Moltke considered it to be strong enough to fight another war.[26] By 1875, although he toyed with the idea of a preventive war, French military reforms made it clear that France would not be defeated again easily.[27]

The re-emergence of *Volkskrieg* after 1871 called into question Moltke's basic way of war. Following the teachings of Clausewitz, Moltke had always aimed to destroy completely his opponents' armies as a means of achieving a decisive victory and a peace

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[22] Albrecht Graf von Roon, Denkwürdigkeiten aus dem Leben des General-Feldmarschalls Kriegministers Grafen von Roon Vol. III (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1892) p.193.
[23] Helmuth von Moltke, Militärische Werke I: Militärische Korrespondenz (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1897) p.581. Though the Moltke-Bismarck tension has received much attention from historians, this tension between the Ministry of War and the General Staff has received almost none.
[24] Stadelmann, op.cit., p.280.
[25] France instituted general conscription in 1872. See Douglas Porch, The March to the Marne: The French Army, 1871-1914 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp. 23-32.
[26] Ritter, op.cit., p.227.
[27] For the most recent analysis of the "War-in-Sight Crisis" of 1875 and for a survey of the historiography see, James Stone, "The War Scare of 1875 Revisited," MGM 53 (1994) pp. 304-326.

on German terms. The evidence of the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War suggested, however, that this goal might not be attainable in the future. The Wars of Unification had shown the world the worth of universal conscription on the Prussian model, creating whole "nations in arms."[28] Moltke realized that even if he could defeat his opponent's armies quickly, this did not mean the fight was over, as the war in France had shown. Additionally, he assumed that Germany would be forced to fight a two-front war – against either a France allied with Austria or against a France allied with Russia.[29] Moltke feared that even if he could defeat one foe quickly, he would be forced to shift his armies to meet the other, preventing him from exploiting any battlefield victories he might achieve. Rudolf Stadelmann captured the tension in Moltke's thinking after 1871, "...in Moltke's *Aufmarschpläne* from 1871 to 1890, two tendencies battle one another: the hope for a new Königgrätz and the fear of a new Loire campaign."[30]

By 1877, his deployment plans reflected clearly his pessimism: Fearing that Germany could not completely destroy the armies of its enemies, he wrote into his war plan that it would be the responsibility of the diplomats to conclude a peace, even if the peace had to be concluded on the condition of status quo ante bellum. He wrote:

> Bei sofortiger Offensive ... werden wir im Westen schon in der 3.Woche eine grosse Entscheidungsschlacht habe.
>
> Ist der Erfolg für uns, so werden wir ihn zwar auszubeuten suchen, können aber die Verfolgung nicht bis Paris ausdehnen. Es muss der Diplomatie überlassen werden, ob sie uns, wenn auch nur auf der Grundlage des status quo ante, nach dieser einen Seite hin Ruhe schaffen kann.[31]

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[28] Following the spectacular successes of the Prussian army, Russia , as well as France, began a long period of reform under the guidance of Dmitrii Miliutin, introducing the Statute on Universal Military Service in 1874. Bruce Menning, Bayonets Before Bullets: The Imperial Russian Army, 1861-1914 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) pp. 21-23; and Forrest A. Miller, Dmitrii Miliutin and the Reform Era in Russia (Charlotte: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968) pp. 196-200. Austria had instituted short-service conscription in 1868. Gunther Rothenberg, The Army of Francis Joseph (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1976) pp. 80-81.

[29] On this point, Moltke saw perhaps more clearly than Bismarck. He believed that Austria and Russia were locked in a long struggle over the Balkans, and that "the way to Constantinople goes through Berlin." Quoted in Hugo Zeitz, "Der Schirmer des geeinten Reiches," in Friedrich von Cochenhausen, ed. Von Scharnhorst zu Schlieffen 1806-1906: Hundert Jahre preußisch-deutscher Generalstab (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1933) p.233.

[30] Stadelmann, op.cit., p.325.

[31] Helmuth von Moltke, "Zweifrontenkrieg gegen Frankreich-Russland," 3 February 1877, reprinted in Ferdinand von Schmerfeld, ed. Graf Moltke. Die Aufmarschpläne 1871-1890 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1929), p.66. This *Denkschrift* has more recently been reprinted in Stig Förster, Moltke: Vom Kabinettskrieg zum Volkskrieg: Eine Werkauswahl (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1992) pp. 610-612.

Moltke's *Aufmarschplan* for 1879, when the prospect of a Franco-Russian agreement became even greater, was even more pessimistic.[32] By this date, Moltke reckoned that the French army could field at least 10,000 more troops and around 160 more artillery pieces than Germany. Further, the French had created an "almost hermetically sealed border ... from Switzerland to Belgium."[33] Even if the German army could breach this line, Moltke feared that the army's supply lines would be extremely vulnerable to French forces in his rear. If that wasn't enough, the newly fortified Paris would, in Moltke's view, be able to hold off almost any German siege. He concluded that in case of another Franco-German war, Germany "could no longer expect a rapid conclusion to the struggle."[34]

Moltke, then, realized that there would be no quick victory in the next war, and even feared that the next war might destroy the new Reich and perhaps even German culture. His view is perhaps best summed up by his oft-quoted final speech in the Reichstag on 14 May 1890:

> The age of *Kabinettskriege* is behind us – all we have now is *Volkskrieg*, and any prudent government will hesitate to bring about a war of this nature with all its incalculable consequences...
> .....
> If war should break out, this war which has now been hanging like a sword of Damocles over our heads for more than ten years, no one can estimate its duration or see when it will end. The greatest powers of Europe, which are armed as never before, will fight each other. None can be annihilated so completely in one or two campaigns that it would declare itself vanquished and be compelled to accept hard conditions for peace without any chance, even after a year's time, to renew the fight. Gentlemen, it might be a seven, or even a thirty years' war – but woe to him who sets Europe alight and first throws the match into the powder-barrel![35]

Although Moltke was pessimistic about a future war, he was still a professional soldier, and it was his duty to try to create a workable strategy. His war plans from 1872 until his retirement in 1890 reflect his attempt to solve the dilemma that the re-emergence of *Volkskrieg* forced upon him.

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[32] Moltke reckoned that Germany's anti-Russian diplomatic stance during the Russo-Turkish War made the prospects of a Franco-Russian alliance more likely. Ibid., p.77.
[33] Kaiser Wilhelm I to Bismarck, 2 October 1879, reprinted in Schmerfeld, op.cit., p.80.
[34] Helmuth von Moltke, "Zweifronten Krieg gegen Russland-Frankreich," April 1879, reprinted in Schmerfeld, op.cit., p.77. See also Förster, Moltke, pp. 613-617.
[35] This oft-quoted passage can be found in Helmuth Graf von Moltke, Ausgewählte Werke Vol 3 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1925) p. 345; Jeduha Wallach, op.cit., p.66; Förster, "Facing People's War," pp. 223-224.

The historian Gerhard Ritter believed that Moltke's solution to this strategic dilemma was to shift his approach in keeping with the change in warfare. Ritter felt that Moltke intended to fight on the strategic defensive, though he would begin with a tactical offensive to weaken Germany's enemies. Ritter wrote:

> All that was left to Germany was the strategic defensive – a defensive, however, that would resemble that of Frederic the Great in the Seven Years' War. It would have to be coupled with a tactical offensive of the greatest possible impact until the enemy was paralyzed and exhausted to the point where diplomacy would have a chance to bring about a satisfactory settlement.[36]

In short, Moltke's *Vernichtungsstrategie* of the *Kabinettskrieg* would give way to the *Ermattungsstrategie* of the *Volkskrieg*.

Ritter's interpretation is disputed by Stig Förster who believes that Moltke's realization of the difficulty in fighting the next war drove him to reject the prospect of war and to rely instead upon a system of deterrence. Förster shows that Moltke's calls for a preventive war became weaker and weaker as he became more and more convinced that even if Germany were to win the initial battles, the war would drag on and ultimately destroy the social order of Germany. Instead, according to Förster, Moltke decided that the only true course was to avoid war if possible. To this end, he relied increasingly upon the deterrent effect of a strong German army to keep Germany's enemies from beginning a war.[37]

Clearly, Moltke feared the next war and preferred to put it off if at all possible. However, it is difficult to reconcile Moltke's often bellicose statements with Förster's view. Moltke believed that a war with France would come sooner or later and that it was his task to find a way to fight such a war. While Moltke would probably not have used the term "*Ermattungsstrategie*" to describe his strategy, he clearly felt a quick annihilating victory was beyond the strength of Germany. However, he still believed it was possible to achieve significant successes against his enemies which would make easier the diplomats' task of negotiating peace. Thus, though Moltke increasingly emphasized the role of diplomacy in concluding a war, he believed that the army had an important role in creating the preconditions for peace (i.e., a greatly weakened enemy).

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[36] Ritter, op.cit., p.230.
[37] Förster, "Facing People's War," p.224.

Colmar von der Goltz and the "Nation in Arms"

Moltke's unease with the rise of *Volkskrieg* was reinforced by the research and writing of a member of his staff, Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz. Drawing on his work with the *Kriegsgeschichtliche Abteilung* of the General Staff,[38] Goltz published "Leon Gambetta und die Loirearmee" over several issues of the Preußische Jahrbücher in 1874 and 1875.[39] This was expanded and published 2 years later as Leon Gambetta und seine Armeen.[40] Goltz was full of admiration for Gambetta's achievements. He believed that Gambetta showed the world what was possible under a motivated and patriotic leader. However, Goltz correctly pointed out the shortcomings in Gambetta's improvised armies – their lack of proper training and equipment.[41] Goltz' studies of Gambetta and the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War led him to conclude that Germany needed to improve her armed forces to deal with what France had shown possible.

Goltz believed that, in order to win the next war, Germany must increase the potential of her army by institutionalizing many of the ideas tried by Gambetta in his improvised armies, and he used his conclusion to Leon Gambetta to advocate a number of ways in which Germany could and should prepare herself for future war. He wrote that German officer training should be improved, specifically that the reserve and Landwehr officers should be given better training. A more professional reserve officer corps meant, to Goltz, that the German reserve units would fight more effectively and could be used in wider roles. Aware of German manpower shortages in 1870/71, Goltz also believed that Germany should apply conscription more rigorously. He believed that Germany must make use of every able-bodied man. To make this so, he controversially declared that Germany should reduce her active service from 3 to 2 years, a stance that brought down upon Goltz the wrath of the Kaiser and resulted in his removal from the Great General

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[38] Goltz served on the *Kriegsgeschichtliche Abteilung* of the General Staff from 1872 to 1874 and helped prepare the official history of the war. His wartime experience on the staff of the 2nd Army made him ideally suited for the task of examining the campaign against Gambetta's armies. Hermann Teske, Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz: Ein Kämpfer für den militärischen Fortschritt (Göttingen: Musterschmidt-Verlag, 1957) pp. 25-26.

[39] Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, "Leon Gambetta und die Loirearmee," PJ. Bd.34 (1874).

[40] Idem. Leon Gambetta und seine Armeen (Berlin: F.Schneider, 1877).

[41] Most other accounts of Gambetta's armies were based on Goltz' analysis and stress the weakness of militia-type armies. For example see, Hauptmann von Roeßler, "Vergleich des Feldzuges 1809 am Tajo mit den Kämpfen 1870/71 an der Loire," Beiheft zum Militär-Wochenblatt (1888).

Staff.[42] To help ease the way for extended conscription, Goltz also proposed that the youth of Germany be prepared by schools and youth organizations for military service. He aimed at instilling Germany's young men with the discipline and love of Fatherland necessary for army service. By preparing thoroughly in peacetime, Goltz hoped to avoid the improvised nature of Gambetta's armies, and hence make Germany capable of fighting a *Volkskrieg* more effectively than the French had in 1870/71.[43]

Despite being censured by the Kaiser himself, Goltz continued throughout his long career to stress the necessity for a greater application of conscription and preparation for war, believing that Germany must be able to do better than the French had in 1870/71. In a series of books and articles published over the course of his career, he elaborated his views. In Rossbach und Jena (1883), Goltz used the Prussian defeat at Jena to show how an army apart from its nation was doomed to failure, a theme which he continued with Jena bis Pr.Eylau (1907).[44] He recognized that Prussia had lost in 1806, in part, because her leaders were still fighting a *Kabinettskrieg*, not the *Volkskrieg* of Napoleon and Revolutionary France.[45] He believed that Prussia had become too complacent after Frederick the Great's victories, and had ignored the changes in warfare brought on by the French Revolution. Quite clearly, "Rossbach" was meant by Goltz to read "Sedan" – a warning to his contemporaries not to be complacent in their own victories.[46]

Goltz' best-known and most influential book was Das Volk in Waffen, which was first published in 1883 and was translated into English as The Nation in Arms.[47] Goltz stated early that his goal with this book was to "recall to strategy the attention

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[42] The 2-year service requirement had long been a goal of German liberals, who saw it as a way to weaken the conservative nature of the army. As such it was vehemently opposed by Germany's conservatives. Goltz' career was only saved by the intervention of Moltke. For the Kaiser's reaction to Goltz' call for a 2-year service period see, Dennis Showalter, "Goltz and Bernhardi: The Institutionalization of Originality in the Imperial German Army," Defense Analysis Vol.3 No.4 (1987) p.306.

[43] Goltz, Leon Gambetta, pp. 289-295; Teske, op.cit., pp. 29-30.

[44] Colmar von der Goltz, Rossbach und Jena (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1883), revised as Von Rossbach bis Jena und Auerstedt (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1906); Jena bis Pr. Eylau (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1907).

[45] Goltz, Jena bis Pr.Eylau, pp. 217-220.

[46] Teske, op.cit., p.35.

[47] Colmar von der Goltz, Das Volk in Waffen (Berlin: R. v. Deckers Verlag, 1883). This went through five editions before World War I, a sixth after, and was translated widely. A recent historian has called this book "...the most significant work of military theory from Wilhelmine Germany." Gerd Krumeich, "The Myth of Gambetta and the 'People's War' in Germany and France, 1871-1914," in Förster and Nagler, op.cit., p.646.

which hitherto has been diverted almost exclusively to generalship in battle."[48] To Goltz, the period of modern war brought on by the French Revolution allowed the use of the "whole manhood of the nation."[49] He believed this change in warfare was shown clearly during the Franco-Prussian War, writing: "The day of Cabinet wars is over. It is no longer the weakness of a single man, at the head of affairs, or of a dominant party, that is decisive, but only *the exhaustion of the belligerent nations*."[50] Goltz' message was the same as his earlier works: only by thoroughly preparing her population in peacetime could Germany hope to win the next war. Goltz believed that there was no better place to start than with the nation's youth, and in The Nation in Arms he once again advocated the training of German youth.[51]

Throughout The Nation in Arms, Goltz looked back to the experience in the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War – the *Volkskrieg* – for his inspirations. He maintained that a future war would pit nation against nation, and wrote:

> It is, indeed, conceivable that, in order to impose one's will by force upon an obstinate people, led by a great man, it may be necessary to literally flood [sic] a country with troops and to exert extreme pressure upon the population for years on end.[52]

His vision of a future war excluded decisive battles such as Königgrätz and Sedan. The size of the armies produced by nations in arms, as well as well-placed fortifications, would slow the pace of operations and make such battles impossible. Further, Goltz believed the large modern armies would be able to stretch out across entire border areas, making flanking movements difficult if not impossible. He envisioned that only after a period of encounter battles would any movement be restored in a future war:

> Only when, after the greatest of exertions on both sides, a crisis supervenes, followed on one side by inevitable exhaustion, events begin to move more rapidly. *It is absolutely certain that in a future war events will not march with anything like the rapidity peculiar to our last campaigns*.[53]

Goltz believed that only the moral pressures of the conflict would cause one side eventually to collapse. After destroying an enemy's army, he believed that the enemy's

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[48] Colmar von der Goltz, The Nation in Arms. Revised Edition. (trans. Philip Ashworth) (London: Hugh Rees, 1906) p.5. Based on the 5th German edition (1898).
[49] Ibid., p.21.
[50] Ibid., p.9. Emphasis added.
[51] Ibid., p.26.
[52] Ibid., p.465.

capital and important provinces should be occupied. If this failed to bring about peace, Goltz then recommended:

> There remains the last means, namely, heavy pressure upon the most prosperous and sensitive districts, or the occupation of the whole country and the cutting off of its communication with the outside world.[54]

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Colmar von der Goltz worked throughout his career to implement his ideas about warfare. Goltz was not merely a man of letters; he was a serving officer. As he advanced up the ladder of command in the German army, he was often in a place to put his ideas about preparing Germany for a future war into practice. As a corps commander from 1902 to 1907, Goltz was solely responsible for the training of his troops. He used his position to implement many of his ideas within his corps district, particularly the training of reserve officers.[55] In 1911, Goltz took steps towards implementing his ideas for youth training by unifing the various youth organizations of Germany into the "Jungdeutschlandbund." Goltz saw this organization as a means of preparing Germany's young men for military service and set forward a set of principles by which its members should live. This "Jungdeutschland-Gesetz" emphasised "truthfulness, frugality, reliability, respect for others, healthy living, politeness, and chivalry."[56] Throughout his career, Goltz used every opportunity to prepare Germany better for the difficult war ahead by applying his ideas of a nation in arms.[57]

Other Interpretations

Although Goltz is today perhaps the best-remembered interpreter of *Volkskrieg*, he was not the only writer in Wilhelmine Germany concerned with the phenomenon. In the early 1890s, the army opened its archives of the Franco-Prussian War to researchers. A number took advantage of this and published works which focused on the second phase of the war. However, unlike Moltke, these authors did not conclude that German officers would have to rethink their basic assumptions about strategy and, unlike von der

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[53] Ibid., p.159. Emphasis in original.
[54] Ibid., p.468.
[55] Teske, op.cit., pp. 58-59.
[56] [Bruno] von Mudra, "Generalfeldmarschall Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz," introductory essay to Das Volk in Waffen (6th Edition) (Berlin: R.v.Decker's Verlag, 1925) p.xxv; Teske, op.cit., p.69.

Goltz these writers did not conclude from their research that Germany would have to introduce major reforms into her army. These writers recommended instead relatively minor improvements which would enable the army to fight more efficiently. Two writers in particular from this group stand out – Fritz Hoenig and Georg Cardinal von Widdern.

In 1893, Fritz Hoenig, a retired officer and well-known military writer,[58] published the first of a six-volume account of the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War entitled, Der Volkskrieg an der Loire im Herbst 1870.[59] Prior to this book, Hoenig, who had served as a battalion adjutant in the 2nd Army during the war, had written a number of other accounts of the conflict which mainly focused on the war's tactical lessons.[60] His interest in the phenomenon of *Volkskrieg* had been piqued by his experience during the war, and he had begun researching the campaign of the 2nd Army in 1871 shortly after the war's conclusion. However, only in 1892 was he given the access to the official documents necessary to complete his study.[61]

Hoenig believed that the German army had hitherto paid insufficient attention to the campaign on the Loire, representing it merely as a "struggle between two opposing armies" rather than the "*Volkskrieg*" which it really was. He held that interpreting the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War strictly as a conflict of army against army missed the "change in the character of war." To ignore this change, argued Hoenig, meant seriously underestimating the enemy's [i.e., France's] will and ability to resist in a future conflict.[62] Hoenig wrote that certain nations had the necessary political willpower and the necessary resources to resist to their utmost. Based on the experience of the Franco-Prussian War, he felt that France would show the same powerful will and ability to resist in a future war, even if faced with severe defeats at the outset of a war. He wrote,

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[57] Goltz' 2-year service period was finally introduced in 1893 in the teeth of much conservative opposition. Lamar Cecil, Wilhelm II: Prince and Emperor, 1859-1900 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989) pp. 201-205.

[58] Between 1875 and 1902, Hoenig published 15 some-odd works of military history and theory and countless articles. Hoenig's career as a military writer is analysed in Joachim Hoffmann, "Der Militärschriftsteller Fritz Hoenig," MGM 1/70 (1970) pp. 5-25.

[59] Fritz Hoenig, Der Volkskrieg an der Loire im Herbst 1870 (6 vols) (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1893-1899). Hoenig's work largely served as the basis for Lonsdale Hale's The 'People's War' in France 1870-1871 (London: Hugh Rees, 1904).

[60] Fritz Hoenig, Zwei Brigaden (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1882) and 24 Stunden Moltkes'cher Strategie entwickelt und erläutert an den Schlachten von Gravelotte und St. Privat (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1891).

[61] Count A. Bothmer, review of Der Volkskrieg an der Loire, United Services Magazine N.S. Vol. VII (1893) p.1032. Bothmer also noted that the principle commanders of the German campaign were deceased by 1892, making "a criticism of their doings ... easier for the author than it would have been immediately after the campaign."

[62] Hoenig, Volkskrieg I, pp. 5-6.

"southern France ... can organize powerful forces and conduct considerable resistance even when all of northern France, including Paris, is subdued."[63] German strategists ignored this fact at their peril.

Hoenig charged that the German strategic leadership had made just this mistake in their initial approach to dealing with the armies of the Government of National Defence, and Hoenig hoped his history of the war would be a critique from which officers could learn and prepare for future wars.[64] In his opinion, the German leadership in 1870 had made the error of believing that France's ability to resist had been removed when the Imperial armies had been destroyed. They did not believe France would be capable of raising new forces. Therefore, when reports came in of new French forces being formed in the provinces, Germany's leaders discounted them. Hoenig faulted the leadership for not taking the threat more seriously and for not doing more to ascertain the whereabouts or strength of these forces.[65] He further believed the German response, when it came, was too weak. He again put this down to an underestimation of the enemy as well as to the shortcomings of some of the German higher commanders.

Indeed, Hoenig's work consisted of a long critique of the German command in 1870/71. In all, he felt that the German leadership was taken completely by surprise by the continued French resistance after the defeat of the Imperial armies, and that they reacted slowly and ineffectively to the threat posed by the newly formed French armies and to the partisan threat to the German lines of communication. After underestimating the French threat, Hoenig felt that some commanders (most notably the Grand Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin) then began to overestimate them after a few set backs.[66] Further, the German response to the French armies on the Loire was poorly co-ordinated.[67] Hoenig maintained that a more robust initial German response to the fresh French armies would have dealt them a blow from which they would never have recovered. With stronger leadership, Hoenig argued, the whole campaign on the Loire could have been ended almost before it had even begun.

In the same year that Hoenig's first volumes appeared, a retired cavalry colonel, Georg Cardinal von Widdern, began publishing his multi-volumed history of the partisan

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[63] Ibid., p.8.
[64] Ibid., p.iii, p.7.
[65] Ibid., pp. 27-29. *Generalleutnant* von Podbielski, Moltke's *Generalquartiermeister*, described the French forces as a "mob," incapable of serious operations. p.339.
[66] Ibid., p.10.

war on the German lines of communication in 1870/71.[68] Cardinal had served during the war with the *Etappendienst* guarding the German supply lines and had later become an instructor at various *Kriegsschulen* in the new Reich. Like Hoenig, Cardinal believed that the next war would in all likelihood be a *Volkskrieg* similar to the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War. In particular, he felt that the war's second phase had shown just how vulnerable modern armies were to partisan warfare. Cardinal wrote that, as the size and complexity of armies increased, so did their reliance upon fixed lines of communication. He maintained that the German army should learn from its experience in the *Volkskrieg*, and, like Hoenig, intended his work to be a guide from which officers could learn.[69]

At the heart of Cardinal's work was the opinion that Germany must better prepare her armed forces for the "*Kleinkrieg*," or partisan war,[70] which was sure to accompany any future war. He noted that in 1870/71, the German army maintained a force of over 110,000 troops and close to 70 artillery pieces to cover the long lines of communication through which the supplies for Germany's 454,000 man field army came. Thus for every four fighting troops, one was necessary to guard the flow of supplies.[71] Cardinal also noted that in the Franco-Prussian War this task had fallen to the troops of the Landwehr, a force which he believed the war unsuited to fight this difficult type of conflict. Cardinal felt that the Landwehr officers had been out of active service for too long to be able to respond to the demands of such a tactically challenging task. He also maintained that the troops as well were too old to fight the mobile war demanded by the nature of the *Kleinkrieg*.[72]

Although Cardinal recognized the changed nature of war and the likelihood that the next war would be similar to the *Volkskrieg* of the last, he, like Hoenig, did not feel large changes were needed in the German army. Cardinal wanted the army to train its officers to fight the *Kleinkrieg* as well as the more glamorous mobile war. He

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[67] Hoenig, Volkskrieg VI, p.334.
[68] Georg Cardinal von Widdern, Der Krieg an den rückwärtigen Verbindungen der deutschen Heer und der Etappendienst (6 vols) (Berlin: R.Eisenschmidt, 1893-99).
[69] The concluding volume even offered "Taktische Aufgaben aus dem Gebiet des Kleinen Krieges," from which officers could practice what they had learned. Der Krieg an den rückwärtigen Verbindungen V, pp. 77-84.
[70] The terms "*Kleinkrieg*" and "*petite guerre*" were generally used to describe partisan warfare. Cardinal assumed that the *Kleinkrieg* of the future would be more systematic than in the past and would be carried out by larger and better prepared formations.
[71] Der Krieg an den rückwärtigen Verbindungen I, pp. iv-v.
[72] Ibid., III, p.56, 73.

recommended Germany assign more active-duty troops and a few higher-level officers to the *Etappendienst* so that the German army would be better prepared for the attacks against its communications which he believed must come in a future conflict.[73] Therefore, like Hoenig and most other German officers, Cardinal felt the German army needed only to tinker with its formula to overcome the changes in warfare brought about by the re-appearance of the *Volkskrieg*.

Thus, the works by Hoenig and Cardinal were at heart quite different from those of Goltz. While all three saw the *Volkskrieg* on the Loire as a foreshadowing of future conflicts, Hoenig and Cardinal stressed the deficiencies of the German army, rather than the capabilities of the French improvised armies.[74] In the end, Hoenig and Cardinal felt French successes could be better explained by German failings. As Dennis Showalter has noted, "this was a comfortable answer. It implied that the situation could have been prevented by measures within German control."[75] While Hoenig and Cardinal hoped that German officers would learn from the mistakes of the campaign on the Loire, they did not feel the Germans were incapable of winning another *Volkskrieg*. Thus, unlike Goltz, they did not feel a thorough-going program of reform was needed. Despite the sometimes controversial nature of their works, Hoenig and Cardinal reflected more clearly the interpretation of the Franco-Prussian War generally accepted by the rest of the German army.

Conclusion

Looking back nearly 130 years, it is obvious today that the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War pointed more precisely to the way of the future than the great victories of the first phase. This phase displayed many features of the much greater *Volkskrieg* which would come 45 years later. Although recent research has called into question the amount of public support for the policies of the Government of National

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[73] Ibid., V, pp. 23-49. See also his Der Kleine Krieg und der Etappendienst. Kriegsgeschichtliche und taktische Studie (4 vols.) (Leipzig: Eisenschmidt, 1892-1907).
[74] Many of Hoenig's other works stressed German shortcomings during the war. In particular, Hoenig's quest for historical accuracy regarding the Battle of Gravelotte landed him in front of an *Ehrengericht* for allegedly maligning the character of General Schwarzkoppen. See Fritz Hoenig, Meine Ehrenhandlung mit dem Oberst und Flügeladjutant von Schwarzkoppen und dem Oberst und Abteilungschef im Generalstabe von Bernhardi (Berlin: 1902).
[75] Showalter, op.cit., p.309.

Defense,[76] the French clearly strove hard to achieve near total mobilization and to create a "nation in arms," even if they fell somewhat short of their goals: The government attempted to follow a "scorched earth" policy, issuing orders to destroy anything of value lest it fall into enemy hands. Manpower mobilization called a large proportion of the male population to the colors. French partisan activity brought forth reprisals against civilians from the German army, creating an upward spiral of violence remembered by both sides long after the war's end. The German army also deliberately targeted the civil population of fortresses under siege in an effort to bring resistance to an end sooner. With the Franco-Prussian War, war in Europe had ceased to be a war of government against government and became one of nation against nation.

Thus, although the Franco-Prussian War appeared to be a spectacular victory for the Germans and appeared to secure German military dominance of Europe, in fact, the war sowed the seeds of the destruction of the Second German Empire. The war's first phase showed the world the worth of an army based on conscription, while the second phase of the war demonstrated the ability of a modern nation-state to mobilize considerable resources, both manpower and industrial, and to continue resistance even after suffering a severe military defeat. These lessons were not lost on Germany's enemies, and they quickly instituted conscription and built up the structure of a "nation in arms" along Gambetta's model in their countries. After 1871, Germany could no longer count on her enemies being unprepared. Any future European conflict would pit the resources of whole nations against one another.

This shift in warfare was recognized by a number of clear-sighted German military commentators. Foremost amongst these was the intellectual father of the Wilhelmine army, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder. Moltke's war plans from 1872 onwards, as well as his public writings, reflected his understanding of how the rise of *Volkskrieg* affected Germany. His solution to Germany's growing strategic dilemma was to work more closely with Germany's diplomats, both in peacetime and in war, to ensure that Germany fought under the most favorable conditions possible.

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[76] Sanford Kanter, "Exposing the Myth of the Franco-Prussian War," War and Society Vol.4 Nr.1 (1986) pp. 13-30 and Krumeich, op.cit., pp. 641-655. While the views of both authors on the support enjoyed by the government might be true, there is no doubting that the armies of Gambetta caused the Germans considerable difficulties and that the second phase of the war represented a distinct departure from the conditions of the war's first phase.

Moltke's ideas about *Volkskrieg* were supported, to a greater or lesser extent, by a number of young writers, who also focused their research on the impact of *Volkskrieg*. The writings of Colmar von der Goltz – one of Wilhelmine Germany's most prominent military intellectuals –centered on how Germany should prepare herself for the task of fighting and winning another *Volkskrieg*. His solution was to institutionalize Gambetta's improvisations – to prepare Germany in peacetime for the utmost exertion in wartime. Hoenig and Cardinal were less radical in their demands for army reform than Goltz, calling for small improvements rather than fundamental change. Each author, however, believed that, with suitable changes in place, Germany could prevail in a future *Volkskrieg*.

Unlike Moltke, though, Goltz, Hoenig, and Cardinal were not in positions of authority when they wrote their books on the *Volkskrieg* in France. All three authors took a minority view on the lessons of the Franco-Prussian War. Goltz was even disciplined by the Kaiser for proposing to reduce the terms of service. Hoeing too was censured. His attempts at "de-mystifying" the Wars of Unification landed him in front of a court of honor. Despite this, however, Goltz, Hoenig, and Cardinal had at least the tacit backing of the authorities. Goltz had reached his conclusions while writing the official history of the war and his historical books were written using the archives of the army. Hoenig and Cardinal, as well, were given access to the official records and to the private papers of many of the higher commanders for their works – a fact not missed by observers. Given the scope of access these men had to official records, and the protection given them by the army leadership (every military work had to clear the censors at the General Staff before publication), the historical works of these men could rightly be seen as semi-official accounts.

Indeed, the works of these men served to fill a void in the historiography of the war against France. Moltke himself believed that the official history should not tarnish the prestige of the leaders of the German army. He felt it important to maintain a certain image of the army in the eyes of the German public and in the eyes of Germany's potential enemies. Accordingly, the official history consciously avoided criticizing officers. As such, it lacked the criticism of an impartial history.[77] The research of these

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[77] Arden Bucholz, Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning (Providence: Berg, 1991) p.49.

writers should be seen as an attempt to redress this imbalance and to provide works from which the army could draw the real lessons of the war.

Yet, despite the warnings of these authors, the German army before 1914 focused, as a whole, on the Franco-Prussian War's first phase and used this to support a short-war strategy. Moltke the Elder's successors as Chief of the General Staff planned to defeat the French and Russian armies in a few great battles. His successors cut diplomats from Germany's war plans and planned instead for the German military to impose a "victor's peace" upon both France and Russia. In short, the German strategic leadership after Moltke the Elder rejected the idea that a "change in the nature of warfare" had occurred.

One of the most important reasons for this rejection can be found within the writings of the very men who stressed how warfare had changed. While Moltke rather quietly emphasised the shift in warfare and Goltz spoke a bit louder, the research of Hoenig and Cardinal undermined their arguments. Both Hoenig and Cardinal recognized that warfare in the future would be different. However, their works, by examining German errors in 1870/71, maintained that only minor changes would be necessary to deal with a future *Volkskrieg*. To these authors, the change in warfare did not require an abandonment of Germany's traditional approach to war. Thus, their work supported the rejection of Goltz' radical approach and supported the more conventional thinking of men such as Schlieffen.

In rejecting the idea that the Franco-Prussian War represented a shift in warfare, the German strategic leadership before 1914 fatally weakened Germany. Believing that the army could win the next war without outside assistance, the General Staff cut both the Ministry of War and the Foreign Ministry out of its planning process. The result was a fragmentation rather than an integration of Germany's higher authorities. Not knowing the details of Germany's war plan, the Ministry of War would not support the army increases demanded by the General Staff. Not knowing the army's war plan, the Foreign Office could take no steps to ease Germany's diplomatic situation before the conflict. Once Germany's plan had failed and the *Volkskrieg* rejected by the General Staff had set in, Germany was forced, like Gambetta in 1870, to improvise her war effort.

Chapter Two:
The (Re)Birth of Ermattungsstrategie

One of Wilhelmine Germany's most important strategic commentators was not a serving soldier, but rather an academic – Hans Delbrück. The 60 some-odd years of his career spanned the bellicose life of the *Kaiserreich* – from its foundation through the Franco-Prussian War to its demise through the First World War. During that period, Delbrück played a key role in many areas of Wilhelmine society. He was at once a teacher at one of the most important universities in Germany (Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität in Berlin), editor of the influential journal Preußische Jahrbücher, member of the *Freikonservative Partei* in the Prussian Landtag and later in the Reichstag, and writer of numerous works on history and contemporary affairs.[1] Most importantly for this study, Delbrück was a sharp critic of German strategic thinking in the years before World War I, believing it to be close-minded in its approach to learning lessons from the past.[2]

At roughly the same time as Moltke the Elder and Colmar von der Goltz were questioning the army's continued adherence to *Vernichtungsstrategie* by examining the consequences of the *Volkskrieg* of 1870/71, Delbrück was challenging the intellectual underpinnings of the German army's approach to war from another direction. The young professor went so far as to attempt to form a new strategy (or rather, in his view, recall an old strategy) to deal effectively with the new reality of *Volkskrieg*. The resulting *Streit* would eventually draw in most of the army's intellectuals, and if Delbrück's ideas were not fully accepted, the discourse would at least provide Germany's soldiers with the intellectual basis for an alternative strategy in 1914.

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[1] Peter Paret saw him as a forerunner of the modern "national security" specialist. Peter Paret, "Hans Delbrück on Military Critics and Military Historians," Military Affairs Fall 1966 pp. 148-149.

[2] Despite playing such an important role in German society before World War I, Delbrück has never been the subject of a thorough biography, as has been noted by Arden Bucholz and others. Several studies of limited aspects of his career have been subjects of monographs. Most recently, Sven Lange, Hans Delbrück und der 'Strategiestreit': Kriegführung und Kriegsgeschichte in der Kontroverse 1879-1914 (Einzelschriften zur Militärgeschichte No. 40 Herausgegeben vom Militärgeschichtlichen Forschungsamt) (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, 1995).

Delbrück's Early Career

As a young man, Hans Delbrück had served in the Franco-Prussian War, first as a corporal and then as a reserve lieutenant, winning the Iron Cross, first class, before being invalided home with typhus. This experience was to serve him well in his later career as a military historian. In France, he encountered battle first hand, taking part in the long-remembered battle of Gravelotte. From his letters during the war, we can already discern Delbrück's keen eye for analysis. Amongst other things, Delbrück wrote that he was impressed by the importance of discipline under fire, noting after Gravelotte: "Now I begin to understand how 10,000 closed formation Greeks could beat 100,000 Persians and how the city of Rome could conquer the world."[3] However he also noted, "the men openly admit they do not go into fire the second time with the same enthusiasm as the first and have even less courage the third time."[4] Delbrück's experience also brought him to see the same problem that the professional soldiers would argue over for many years after 1870 – the problem of mounting an attack in the face of modern small arms.[5] Typically, he used his experiences as a junior officer as a guide when writing on military history. Having encountered the rigours of campaigning first hand, Delbrück used his knowledge as a critical filter through which to judge the veracity of many of his sources when later writing military history.

After the Franco-Prussian War, Delbrück returned to his studies and completed his dissertation in 1873,[6] the first to be submitted and defended in German to the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Bonn.[7] He then took up a number of important teaching positions; first as tutor to Crown Prince Gustav of Sweden, a position that he held for less than a year, and then in 1874 as tutor to Prince Waldemar, the son of Kronprinz Friedrich Wilhelm. Delbrück's 5 years with the Prussian royal family had a great impact on his thinking.[8] Exposed to the highest political and military levels of the newly formed empire, Delbrück took advantage of his position. While Prince Waldemar's tutor, he struck up friendships with a number of army officers who had

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[3] Hans Delbrück, letter of 19 August 1870, quoted in Arden Bucholz, Hans Delbrück and the German Military Establishment: War Images in Conflict (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1985) p.23

[4] Idem, letter of 11 August 1870, Ibid., p.22.

[5] Idem, letter of 19 August 1879, Ibid., p.23.

[6] Idem, Ueber die Glaubwürdigkeit Lamberts von Hersfeld (Bonn: Carl Georg, 1873).

[7] Anneliese Thimme, Hans Delbrück als Kritiker der wilhelminischen Epoche (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1955) p.9.

[8] Hans Delbrück, "Persönliche Erinnerungen an den Kaiser Friedrich und sein Haus," PJ Bd.62 (1888) pp. 97-116.

played key roles in the war, not least being the Kronprinz and his former chief of staff, Albrecht Graf von Blumenthal.[9] Delbrück looked back on this time as being very important for the formulation of his interest in, and many of his ideas on, military history.[10]

This period also afforded Delbrück the opportunity to lay the foundations for his career in military history. At court he met Hedwig Gräfin von Brühl, the granddaughter of Neidhardt Graf von Gneisenau, who asked him to complete the editing of her famous grandfather's memoirs and papers begun in the 1860s. Delbrück later expanded this into a biography.[11] This decision to pursue a career in *military* history, however, brought Delbrück into conflict with the military and with many other members of the academic historical community, as both groups were hostile to the idea of civilians researching military history. The soldiers saw the field as their own purview, while the academics viewed military history as not a true sub-discipline of history (perhaps a view still widely held today). When Delbrück left the royal family in 1879 and attempted to secure an appointment at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, this choice of discipline caused him much difficulty.

In the summer of 1880, Delbrück tried to have the Prussian Minister of Cultural Affairs, Gustav von Gossler, appoint him as a professor in *military* history at the university. This met with opposition on two counts. First, the faculty at Berlin were opposed to someone using such blatant political influence to skip the chain of seniority. Second, they were opposed to his choice of speciality, seeing military history as part of a specialist discipline, not part of humanities. Delbrück argued that contemporary military history lacked a political facet, which was essential for understanding war. In the end, Delbrück was appointed *Privatdozent* in 1880 and gave his first lecture ("The Battle of Napoleon with Old Europe") in January 1881.[12] Though military history was often the

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[9] Delbrück formed close friendships with a number of important officers (such as Albrecht von Blumenthal and the future chancellor, Leo von Caprivi), corresponding with them in subsequent years. Contained within the Delbrück Nachlass in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin are these letters as well as Delbrück's notes on interviews with Blumenthal and Pape. He used these notes when writing his lectures on the Wars of Unification. (These were later published in Weltgeschichte. Vorlesungen, gehalten an der Universität Berlin 1896-1920. Vol. 5 Neuzeit von 1852 bis 1888. (Berlin: Otto Stollberg, 1928.)

[10] Hans Delbrück, History of the Art of War within the Framework of Political History Vol.I: Antiquity (trans. Walter J. Renfroe) (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975) pp. 13-14.

[11] Idem, Das Leben des Grafen Neidhardt von Gneisenau 2 Vols. (Berlin: Georg Stilke, 1880).

[12] For Delbrück's struggle with the academic community, see Bucholz, Delbrück, particularly, pp. 19-44.

subject of his lectures, he never succeeded in having a chair of military history founded. His various positions at the university were all confined to general history.

Two years after Delbrück began his academic career, he joined the Prussian Landtag as a deputy for the *Freikonservative Partei*, a position he occupied until 1885. From 1884 until 1890, he was a *Freikonservativer* deputy in the Reichstag. Delbrück seems, however, not to have considered politics a career. Though he often criticized specific policies from his column in the Preußische Jahrbücher, he does not seem to have been deeply engaged in Reichstag politics. The party for which he was a deputy claimed to represent no specific interest groups, holding itself to stand for "das Vaterland über die Partei" and for "das Nationalinteresse über alles."[13]

In addition to his duties as a professor and representative, Delbrück also went on to edit the Preußische Jahrbücher for almost 40 years, where he published a column in each issue entitled *Politische Correspondenz.* The Preußische Jahrbücher was founded by Heinrich von Treitschke in the 1850s to support German unification and independence.[14] (In 1896, Delbrück would take over Treitschke's chair at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität.) The journal went out to a large number of decisionmakers in the Kaiserreich, reaching, according to one contemporary source, the "best circle" of German and foreign society.[15] Its pages provided Delbrück with a forum from which he engaged his intellectual opponents frequently.[16]

The Strategiestreit *and* Ermattungsstrategie

Delbrück's differences of opinion with the faculty at Berlin over military history were echoed by a debate with the military that was taking shape at roughly the same time – a debate which illustrates the thinking of a significant portion of the military in Wilhelmine Germany and one from which Delbrück's concept of *Ermattungsstrategie* would spring. In 1879, Delbrück published a review of Frederick the Great's "Military

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[13] Thimme, op.cit., p.31.
[14] Preußische Jahrbücher. H.4 Bd. 3 (1859), Vorwort.
[15] According to Kürchners Handbuch der Presse, quoted in Thimme, op.cit., p.12. Among the readers of the Preußische Jahrbücher was Helmuth von Moltke the Younger. Arden Bucholz, Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning (Providence, RI: Berg Publishers, 1991) p.217.
[16] Delbrück took over as editor-in-chief from Treitschke after a heated debate over the personality of Kaiser Friedrich III, whom Delbrück defended. Hans Schleier, "Treitschke, Delbrück und die 'Preußischen Jahrbücher' in den 80er Jahren des 19.Jahrhunderts," Jahrbuch für Geschichte Jg.1 (1967) pp. 134-179; Bucholz, Delbrück, p.46.

Testament," which had just been published for the first time in an annotated version.[17] In his review Delbrück took the editor, Major Adalbert von Taysen, to task for several points. Aside from some minor historical inaccuracies, Delbrück found Taysen's editing to be heavy handed and that, most damningly, Taysen misunderstood the central point of the "Testament."

Frederick's "Military Testament," written in the autumn of 1768 and originally part of his "Political Testament," called for a "*Detachmentskrieg*" to be waged in case of a war with Austria – Prussian forces would seize Austrian territory and fight a defensive battle from prepared positions. In his comments to the edition, Taysen stated that the "Military Testament" only outlined a campaign plan for the next encounter with Austria and could not be in any way considered an elaboration of Frederick's general philosophy of war. Taysen maintained that Frederick normally sought decision through battle, not through occupying enemy territory and destroying enemy crops, etc. To Taysen, Frederick sought to win his wars through great decisive battles which annihilated the enemy's armed forces, just as Napoleon and Moltke would in the future. Delbrück argued precisely the opposite – Frederick's "Military Testament" was not a campaign plan for the next war but a general statement of Frederick's approach towards war. Delbrück further declared that "Frederick had at all times...looked upon 'battle' as an evil, which one must subject oneself to only in the case of the utmost necessity"[18] and that "Frederick's aversion to battle [outlined in the "Testament"] was in no way something new, but rather it was an improvement of a previously held conviction."[19]

Delbrück's strident criticism of Taysen's editorial views and his unique interpretation of Frederick the Great brought him into conflict with the military. His review received immediate challenge from one of Taysen's colleagues in the General Staff. In the next issue of the Zeitschrift für preußische Geschichte und Landeskunde, Colmar von der Goltz wrote an "Antikritik" rejecting Delbrück's analysis.[20] Delbrück

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[17] Hans Delbrück, Review of 'Das militärische Testament Friedrichs des Grossen. Herausgegeben und erläutert von v. Taysen, Major im Grossen Generalstabe.' in Zeitschrift für preußische Geschichte und Landeskunde (Hereafter, ZfpGL) 16.Jg. (Jan-Feb 1879) pp. 27-32.
[18] Ibid., p.31.
[19] Ibid., p.32.
[20] Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, "Antikritik," ZfpGL 16.Jg. (Mai-Juni 1879) pp. 292-304. Goltz at the time was serving as an instructor at the *Kriegsakademie* and in the *Kriegsgeschichtliche Abteilung* of the GGS. Hermann Teske, Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz: Ein Kämpfer für den militärischen Fortschritt. (Göttingen: Musterschmidt Verlag, 1957) pp. 32-37.

responded in turn, defending his views in the same issue.[21] For the next 30 years, Delbrück and the military sparred, ostensibly over interpretations of Frederick the Great's strategy; each article by one side brought forth a response from the other with each side only slowly coming closer to the view of the other. The list of Delbrück's opponents reads like a "Who's Who" of Wilhelmine military intellectuals: Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, Theodor von Bernhardi and his son Friedrich, Rudolph von Caemmerer, Fritz Hoenig, Wilhelm Scherff, and Alfred von Boguslawski – most of whom taught at the *Kriegsakademie* and reached the rank of general. By criticizing a key figure in the panoply of the German military, Delbrück succeeded in uniting an otherwise fragmented officer corps against him.[22] Delbrück's debate with the military has been well covered elsewhere,[23] thus it is not necessary to explore it in great depth here. It is important, however, for this study in two ways: first, from this *Strategiestreit* Delbrück's idea of *Ermattungsstrategie* developed fully; second, implied within Delbrück's interpretation of Frederick the Great's strategy was a criticism of the military's conception of contemporary war.

Delbrück began to develop his unique views on war while editing Gneisenau's papers. While working through Gneisenau's notes, Delbrück was brought into contact with the ideas of a close friend and colleague of Gneisenau's, Carl von Clausewitz. In Gneisenau's papers, Delbrück found a manuscript by Clausewitz, entitled "Ueber das Fortschreiten und den Stillstand der kriegerischen Begebenheiten" ("On the Progress and the Stagnation of the Military Arts").[24] This essay, in conjunction with Clausewitz' "*Nachrichten*" to his collected works,[25] made Delbrück reflect on Clausewitz' ideas. Delbrück came to believe that Clausewitz had posited, shortly before his death, not the one form of strategy normally accepted by Delbrück's contemporaries (*Vernichtungsstrategie*), but rather two forms of strategy. Delbrück believed that Clausewitz was in the process of editing Vom Kriege to reflect this new discovery, but

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[21] Hans Delbrück, "Duplik," ZfpGL 16.Jg. (Mai-Juni 1879) pp. 305-314.
[22] The lively debates within the German army during this period have never been fully examined. For an introduction see Daniel Hughes, "Schlichting, Schlieffen and the Prussian Theory of War," JMH 59 (1995) pp. 257-278; and Antulio J. Echevarria, "A Crisis in Warfighting: German Tactical Discussions in the Late Nineteenth Century," MGM 55 (1996) pp. 51-68.
[23] Delbrück himself gives an overview in his History of the Art of War Vol IV: The Dawn of Modern Warfare (trans. Walter J. Renfroe) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985) pp. 378-382. See also Lange, op.cit., passim.
[24] Later published by Delbrück in ZfpGL 15.Jg. (Mai-Juni 1878) pp. 233-241.
[25] These *Nachrichten* remain even today the subject of much conjecture and debate. See Azar Gat, "Clausewitz's final notes," MGM 1/89 pp. 45-50.

this editing was interrupted by Clausewitz' call to Poland in 1830 and his subsequent death.

The first of the strategies elaborated by Clausewitz formed the core of the unedited Vom Kriege and consisted of Clausewitz' interpretations of Napoleon's strategy. This he called *Niederwerfungsstrategie* (strategy of annihilation), and was based on his experiences in and research on the 20 years of Revolutionary and Napoleonic warfare. At the core of this strategy is the "*Schlacht*," the "battle." Clausewitz observed that Napoleon always sought an encounter with his enemy that would result in a decisive victory. To achieve this decisive victory, Napoleon aimed to annihilate his opponent's army in a great battle. To Napoleon, the "battle" was everything: "Fünf Meilen den Tag zu marschiren zu schlagen zu ruhen, das sei seine ganze Kriegskunst..."[26] Thus Clausewitz outlined his first strategy: "...the object is to overthrow the enemy – to render him politically helpless or militarily impotent, thus forcing him to sign whatever peace we please..."[27]

Based on the experiences of the Napoleonic Wars, *Niederwerfungsstrategie*, or *Vernichtungsstrategie* as it came to be known, formed the basis for military strategy after 1815. Soldiers, particularly Prussian soldiers, had learned a hard lesson at the hands of the Emperor of the French and were determined not to repeat their past mistakes. The old careful approach to warfare of the 17th and 18th centuries gave way to a less restricted way of war that sought to defeat totally an enemy's forces in battle, and thus dictate, rather than negotiate, peace. German strategists embraced this form of warfare, and "proved" its validity with the defeat of the Austrian armies in 1866 and the Imperial French armies in 1870. Wilhelm Groener admitted after World War I how deeply ingrained this idea had been in the German army before 1914:

> Das Offizierkorps hatte sein Denken gebildet an dem Studium der Kriege Napoleons und Moltkes. Sie waren geschlagen im Stile der Niederwerfungsstrategie: ein reißendes Hinströmen der Heere über das feindliche Land, die Entscheidung des Krieges in wenigen, gewaltigen Schlägen, ein Friedensschluß, in dem der wehrlose Gegner gezwungen war, widerspruchlos die Bedingungen des Siegers anzunehmen.[28]

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[26] Hans Delbrück, "Die Strategie des Perikles erläutert durch die Strategie Friedrichs des Großen," in PJ 64 (1889) p.265.

[27] Carl von Clausewitz, "Note of July 1827," On War (trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) p.69. Quoted by Delbrück, "Perikles," p.261.

[28] Wilhelm Groener, "Delbrücks Lehre, das Heer und der Weltkrieg," in Emil Daniels and Paul Rühlmann, eds., Am Webstuhl der Zeit: Eine Erinnerungsgabe Hans Delbrück dem Achtzigjährigen von Freunden und Schülern dargebracht (Berlin: Reimar Hobbing, 1928) p.44.

German historians and strategists, however, looked further back for their inspiration than Napoleon, claiming that Frederick's approach to war foreshadowed Napoleon's.

Thus, when Delbrück challenged this view of Frederick as the forerunner of Napoleon, he challenged the accepted wisdom of the military establishment. In his "Antikritik" to Delbrück's "Kritik," Goltz espoused the General Staff view of Frederick, arguing that the King "...held the tactical decision to be the surest way to impose his will, and that he in no way had an aversion to [battle]."[29] Goltz went on to provide illustrations to show that Frederick sought "battle" whenever possible, and concluded, "the possibility of beating the enemy appeared to Frederick as valid a reason to seek battle as it did to Napoleon."

Delbrück could not accept this view of Frederick's strategy. To the *Niederwerfungsstrategie* espoused by Goltz and the military establishment, Delbrück outlined what he believed to be Clausewitz' second type of strategy – *Ermattungsstrategie* (strategy of attrition). Delbrück believed that towards the end of his life, Clausewitz had realized that by focusing purely of *Niederwerfungsstrategie*, he was excluding the experiences of earlier warfare from his supposedly universal theory of war. The campaigns of the pre-Revolutionary period were not noted for the decisiveness of their battles, but rather the opposite. Clausewitz observed that commanders before Napoleon avoided costly "battles" and preferred to rely upon maneuver and smaller engagements to achieve their, generally more limited, goals. Clausewitz, according to Delbrück, recognized that there were circumstances where the motives of a nation did not warrant annihilating an enemy's armed strength completely and also (more importantly for this study) that there were times when a nation's limited strength made the total annihilation of an enemy army, and with it a dictated peace, almost impossible. Delbrück believed that Clausewitz showed the time for *Ermattungsstrategie* was when a nation had only "modest political goals, weak motives, [or] limited strength."[30]

Delbrück argued that Frederick followed *Ermattungsstrategie* not because his will was any weaker than Napoleon's but because he was constrained by the conditions of his age. Delbrück repeated his assertions that Frederick fought battles only when forced to by circumstances and added reasons why this was so:

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[29] Goltz, "Antikritik," p.299.
[30] Quoted in Delbrück, "Perikles," p. 262.

> Friedrich hatte nicht genug Geld, nicht genug Soldaten, nicht genügend zuverlässige Soldaten, um den Krieg zu führen im Style [sic] Napoleons: darum schlug er eine Schlacht nur, wenn es ein anderes Mittel, zu seinem Zwecke zu gelangen, nicht gab.[31]

Frederick's army was in no way up to the campaigns of Napoleon's. It was made up of professional soldiers, impressed men, and prisoners of war. The army of Frederick was exactly that – a dynastic force, not a national force as under Napoleon. Soldiers, held only in line by "iron discipline," deserted when ever possible, making fighting war as under Napoleon – living off the land, fighting in broken terrain, pursuing a beaten foe – impossible. In short, according to Delbrück's analysis, Frederick's Prussia did not have the ability to annihilate its enemies.

The most systematic exposition of *Ermattungsstrategie* came in Delbrück's "Die Strategie des Perikles erläutert durch die Strategie Friedrichs des Großen," first published serially in Preußische Jahrbücher in 1889.[32] Delbrück held that under certain circumstances, most notably in the days of Frederick, it was not possible to wage *Vernichtungsstrategie*. When these circumstances prevailed, Delbrück hoped to show that means other than great battles must be used to win a war. Operations other than "battle," he termed "maneuver." These included occupying an enemy's territory, destruction of an enemy's commerce and trade (especially through blockade when possible), and destruction of key industries and crops. In between the two "poles" of pure maneuver and decisive battle, Delbrück placed "small battles" (*Kleingefechte*) and "sieges of fortresses."[33] He believed that, depending upon circumstances prevailing at the time, commanders moved between the two poles of battle and maneuver.[34] When a *Feldherr* possessed insufficient forces to pursue a *Vernichtungsstrategie*,

> ...so kommt es darauf an, wer zuerst ermattet, also nicht nur die Kräfte des Feindes zu schädigen, sondern ebenso sehr die eigenen zu schonen; 'den letzten Thaler in der Tasche zu behalten.'[35]

Thus, a *Feldherr* following *Ermattungsstrategie* followed a variety of methods by which he compelled the enemy to do his will. "Battle" was only one, usually shunned,

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[31] Delbrück, "Duplik," p.308.
[32] See footnote 25. "Perikles" was later published as a pamphlet. Die Strategie des Perikles erläutert durch die Strategie Friedrichs des Grossen (Berlin: Walter & Apoland, 1890).
[33] Delbrück, "Perikles," pp. 267-268.
[34] Ibid., p.270. Hence, Delbrück's alternative name for *Ermattungsstrategie*, "*Die zweipolige Strategie.*"
[35] Ibid.

element. Occupation of enemy territory, destruction of enemy trade, and the wearing down of enemy forces through small battles took the place of great battles. In short, military means served as only one weapon in *Ermattungsstrategie*. Delbrück continued to stress that a *Feldherr* was compelled by the conditions of his age to fight one strategy or the other. To Delbrück, Frederick was a great captain because he realized the limitations imposed upon him by his age and fought intelligently within those limitations.[36]

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The publication of "Perikles" marked the beginning of a new period in the *Strategiestreit*.[37] In "Perikles," Delbrück elaborated for the first time fully his new interpretation of Clausewitz and his ideas about *Ermattungsstrategie*. In "Perikles," he linked *Ermattungsstrategie* to not only Frederick the Great, but to other historical figures as well. Delbrück tried to establish that *Ermattungsstrategie* was not limited to warfare of the 18th century but operated at other times as well – in short, that it was a strategic principle which could not simply be ignored by modern soldiers. "Perikles" drew even greater response from the military, and the *Streit* expanded off the pages of specialist journals onto the pages of national newspapers. Delbrück's ideas were attacked by military writers in the National-Zeitung, the Norddeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, the Voßische Zeitung, the Dresdener Tageblatt, and the Straßburger Post, to name some of the more prominent papers.[38] Contrary to the wishes of the soldiers, the expansion of the debate onto the pages of the national press brought Delbrück's ideas to a much wider audience than previously and merely prolonged the debate.[39]

Nowhere in the writings of the *Strategiestreit* did Delbrück explicitly criticize the military's views on contemporary war. The debate always stuck rigidly to historical topics. However, Delbrück's analysis of Frederick's strategy and his new interpretation of Clausewitz threatened the military in two ways. First, by challenging the veracity of

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[36] Idem, "Die methodische Kriegführung Friedrichs des Grossen," PJ 54 (1884) p.196.
[37] Lange also recognizes this date as the beginning of a new phase of the *Streit*. However, he believes it is a separate phase because of the growing support for Delbrück's ideas. Lange, op.cit., pp. 98-113.
[38] Clippings from these newspapers are contained in the Delbrück Nachlass, Folder 93/1, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.
[39] The debate was even picked up by foreign armies. See the Austro-Hungarian Reichswehr, 14 February 1892; and Spenser Wilkinson's "Recent German Military Literature," United Services Magazine NS Vol. V (1892) p.668. It is clear from reading Wilkinson's survey, however, that he had not actually read Delbrück's works, only those of his opponents.

the army's historical interpretation, Delbrück called into question, albeit indirectly, the army's view of warfare. History played a crucial role in the Wilhelmine army, especially as officers with combat experience retired. Moltke the Elder himself put forward the view that "...long-range strategy could be developed with common sense and knowledge of military history."[40] Accordingly, in 1890, military history stood second only to tactics in number of hours per week (4) in the curriculum of the *Kriegsakademie*, and the continuity between the wars of Frederick the Great, Napoleon, and Moltke was emphasised.[41] At the *Kriegsakademie*, and within the army in general, students applied historical examples to modern situations, a process called the applicatory method. Officers focused not on seeking historical truth but rather on examples which illustrated their current ideas. A prominent General Staff officer, Maximillian Yorck Graf von Wartenburg, wrote, "we study military history not to recapture historical events, nor to use the opportunity to repeat past occurrences ... but to choose what is valuable to us and to say how it went and why."[42] Delbrück's questioning of a central figure of the army's interpretation of military history thus challenged their view of modern war. Friedrich von Bernhardi admitted as much in 1892, saying that Delbrück's writings represented a "...judgement on modern strategy through historical research and public opinion."[43]

Delbrück, however, not only called into question the army's analysis of history but also the army's understanding of Clausewitz. This represented a more direct attack on their current approach towards war. After the Wars of Unification, Moltke had thrust Clausewitz into the center of German military thought, by declaring Vom Kriege one of the greatest influences on his life.[44] Indeed, Moltke's direction of the campaigns in 1866 and 1870/71 owed much to his interpretation of Clausewitz' analysis of Napoleon's

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[40] Steven E. Clemente, For King and Kaiser! The Making of the Prussian Army Officer, 1860-1914 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992) p.181.
[41] Ibid., pp. 179-180.
[42] Maximillian Yorck Graf von Wartenburg, Napoleon als Feldherr Vol.1 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1885) p.1. Yorck, who served as military history instructor at the *Kriegsakademie* from 1897-1898, was tipped as a possible successor to Schlieffen but was killed during the Boxer Rebellion. Bernhard Schwertfeger, Die grossen Erzieher des deustchen Heeres: Aus der Geschichte der Kriegsakademie (Potsdam: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1936) p.138; Bucholz, Prussian War Planning, p.188.
[43] Friedrich von Bernhardi, "Mittheilung zum Streit über die strategische Theorie und Praxis Friedrichs des Grossen," Beilage zur Allgemeine Zeitung Nr.65 (1892) p.6, quoted in Lange, op.cit., p.101. Bernhardi was later an instructor in military history at the *Kriegsakademie* and *Chef der Kriegsgeschichtlichen Abteilung* of the General Staff. Walter K. Nehring, "General der Kavallerie Friedrich von Bernhardi – Soldat und Militärwissenschaftler," in Bradley and Marwedel, eds. Militärgeschichte, Militärwissenschaft und Konfliktforschung: Eine Festschrift für Werner Hahlweg (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1977) pp. 295-308.
[44] Eberhard Kessel, Moltke (Stuttgart: K.F. Koehler, 1957) p.108.

methods. After 1871, Moltke's reading of Clausewitz became the predominant view within the army, and Vom Kriege was increasingly used by soldiers to support their own ideas about modern warfare.[45] By attacking the prevailing view of Clausewitz, Delbrück attacked the main theoretical underpinning of German strategic thought.

However, the reaction of military intellectuals to Delbrück's ideas was far from the uniform front portrayed by most accounts.[46] As Delbrück's critique of the military took place on two levels, so did the military response. One school, by far the largest, attacked both Delbrück's historical and theoretical critiques. After the publication of "Perikles," this school was spearheaded by Friedrich von Bernhardi.[47] In 1892, Bernhardi published Delbrück, Friedrich der Grosse und Clausewitz in which he rejected both Delbrück's historical interpretation and his views on Clausewitz.[48] In his memoirs, Bernhardi wrote that he attacked Delbrück because "at the time there lay the danger that unquestioning people [*urteilslose Menschen*] might be dazzled by the originality of [Delbrück's] opinions."[49]

Another school within the army accepted, to a certain degree, Delbrück's historical analysis, but had difficulties with his strategic interpretations. Rudolph von Caemmerer was one example of this group.[50] Caemmerer represented a school within the German army (headed by Sigismund von Schlichting) which accepted the periodization of military history. To them, the German Wars of Unification represented a new strategic era, dominated by the ideas of Moltke rather than Napoleon.[51] In their view, improvements in technology and the increased size of armies between the Napoleonic

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[45] See Antulio J. Echevarria II, "Borrowing from the Master: Uses of Clausewitz in German Military Literature before the Great War," War in History 3/3 (1996) pp. 274-292.

[46] Arden Bucholz' Delbrück and Gordon Craig's "Delbrück: The Military Historian," in Peter Paret, ed. Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) pp. 326-353, tend to portray Delbrück's military opponents as a uniform bloc. The most recent and thorough account of the *Strategiestreit*, Sven Lange's Delbrück, is somewhat more nuanced but still falls into the same pattern.

[47] At the time, Bernhardi was in charge of the General Staff's history of Frederick's 1742 campaigns; published as Grosser Generalstab, Die Krieg Friedrichs des Grossen: Der Erste Schlesische Krieg, 1740-1742 (2 vols.) (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1892-1893). Other members of this school include Alfred von Boguslawski and Wilhelm Scherff.

[48] Friedrich von Bernhardi, Delbrück, Friedrich der Grosse und Clausewitz. Streiflichter auf die Lehren des Professor Dr. Delbrück über Strategie (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1892).

[49] Idem, Denkwürdigkeiten aus meinem Leben, (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1927) p.143.

[50] Another member of this school was Fritz Hoenig. See his "Die ein- und zweipolige Strategie," Deutsche Heeres-Zeitung 70.Jg Nr.18 and 19 (1892). Cf. Lange, op.cit., p.106.

[51] Sigismund von Schlichting's Taktische und strategische Grundsätze der Gegenwart (3 vols) (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1898-1899) and Rudolph von Caemmerer's Die Entwicklung der strategischen Wissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert (Berlin: Wilhelm Baensch, 1904) are the prime works of this school. Indeed, Delbrück himself largely accepted Schlichting's views on modern strategy. See below.

Wars and the Wars of Unification changed the strategic conditions so much that one could not speak of Napoleon and Moltke following the same strategy. This view was heavily attacked by many other military writers.[52] Delbrück's periodization of military history offered reinforcement to their own interpretation. While Caemmerer could accept Delbrück's analysis of history, he rejected Delbrück's interpretation of Clausewitz, believing that Delbrück had read too much into Clausewitz' "*Nachrichten*." Caemmerer believed that Clausewitz wrote Vom Kriege as a practical tool for contemporary and future soldiers and statesmen. Delbrück, on the other hand, believed that Clausewitz intended his book to be a dialectic work which explained the nature of war throughout the ages.[53]

This second school had two other important members, Max Jähns and Reinhold Koser. In 1891, Jähns, a former instructor at the *Kriegsakademie*, published the third volume of his Geschichte der Kriegswissenschaft.[54] In this work, Jähns virtually agreed with Delbrück's historical interpretation of Frederick. He wrote that Frederick, although he had attempted to follow *Vernichtungsstrategie* in his early campaigns, had been forced by the circumstances of his age to abandon such an approach to war.[55] Another member of the *Kriegsakademie* staff, Reinhold Koser, began in 1904 to publish a number of works on Frederick which also came close to accepting Delbrück's historical interpretations.[56] Both authors, however, steadfastly rejected that their interpretations of Frederick were identical to Delbrück's, in large part because they rejected Delbrück's strategic interpretation.[57]

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[52] See Antulio J. Echevarria, Neo-Clausewitzianism: Freytag-Loringhoven and the Militarization of Clausewitz in German Military Literature Before the First World War. (Princeton University, Ph.D. Thesis, 1994); and Daniel Hughes, "Schlichting, Schlieffen, and the Prussian Theory of War in 1914," Journal of Military History 59 (April 1995) pp. 257-278.

[53] Hans Delbrück, review of Die Entwicklung der strategischen Wissenschaft im 19.Jahrhundert, in PJ 115 (1904) pp. 347-348.

[54] Max Jähns, Geschichte der Kriegswissenschaft. Vol.3: Das XVII.Jahrhundert seit dem Auftreten Friedrichs des Grossen (Munich: R.Oldenbourg, 1891). Lange views the publication of Jähns' book as the beginning of a new phase of the *Strategiestreit* because it represented a break in the ranks of the military. Lange, op.cit., p.98.

[55] Jähns, op.cit., pp. 2017-2031. The similarities between Jähn's interpretation and Delbrück's were noted by Gustav Roloff in "Eine vermeintliche neue Auffassung der Strategie Friedrichs des Grossen," Beilage zur Allgemeine Zeitung Nr.16 (1892) pp. 1-4.

[56] Reinhold Koser, Die Geschichte Friedrichs des Grossen (4 vols) (Berlin: Cotta, 1914); Idem, "Die preussische Kriegsführung im Siebenjährigen Kriege," Historische Zeitschrift 92 (1904) pp. 239-273.

[57] Max Jähns, "Ueber den Wandel der strategischen Anschauungen Friedrichs des Grossen," Allgemeine Zeitung, 23 February 1892, pp. 4-7; Reinhold Koser, "Zusatz," Historische Zeitschrift 93 (1904) pp. 456-458.

In the end, the writing of Caemmerer, Jähns, and Koser proved that Delbrück's interpretation of Frederick had achieved a degree of grudging acceptance from many military intellectuals.[58] Delbrück's interpretation of Clausewitz and his *Ermattungsstratgie*, however, continued to be rejected by military writers. While some officers, most notably Jähns and Koser, came close to confirming Delbrück's beliefs about Frederick, they refused to become closely associated with them because of Delbrück's strategic ideas. Others, such as Caemmerer and Hoenig, accepted in principle Delbrück's periodization of military history but also continued to rejected his strategic interpretation. In the end, the debate was brought to a close by World War I. Delbrück's ideas remained disputed but had begun to achieve a degree of acceptance from a sceptical military.

Delbrück's Vision of Future War

Early in Delbrück's career, he had drawn the distinction between the functions of a "military historian" and those of a "military commentator." Delbrück argued that a "military historian" had the task of merely presenting the facts of an event in the past and in putting these events into a historical context. On the other hand, he believed that a "military commentator" had the obligation, when discussing historical events, not merely to tell what had happened, but also to tell what should have been done – in other words, to draw lessons from history applicable to the present day.[59] Delbrück placed himself in the former category, and most studies of his thought have accepted his statement and have focused on his work as a historian.[60]

Delbrück, though, lived in a period of great international tension, as Europe went through a series of diplomatic crises and an arms race before World War I. As editor of Preußische Jahrbücher, he had the opportunity to comment on current affairs and on current military matters. Throughout the 1890s and the early 1900s, he published analysis

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[58] Lange, op.cit., p.98.

[59] Delbrück outlined these categories in a review essay entitled "Clausewitz" in ZfpGL 15.Jg. (March-April 1878) pp. 217-231. A portion of this essay was translated and published by Peter Paret. Paret, "Hans Delbrück on Military Affairs," (see FN 1). See also Felix Gilbert, "From Clausewitz to Delbrück and Hintze: Achievements and Failures of Military History," Journal of Strategic Studies Vol.3 Nr.3 (Dec. 1980) pp. 11-20. While both Paret and Gilbert recognize Delbrück's role as a "military commentator," neither examine his analysis of contemporary events.

[60] Even Bucholz' recent translation of a number of Delbrück's columns from the Preußiche Jahrbücher fails to make explicit the connection between his commentary on contemporary affairs and the *Strategiestreit*. See Delbrück's Modern Military History (ed. and trans. Arden Bucholz) (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997).

on wars around the world and on the growing tension within Europe. These commentaries, as well as his reviews of works of military theory, placed Delbrück into the middle of the various debates on contemporary strategy which were engaging the German military in the years before World War I. Further, these commentaries show that Delbrück believed his concept of *Ermattungsstrategie* was very applicable to contemporary affairs and demonstrate that despite declaring himself a military historian, Delbrück also engaged in work as a military commentator.[61]

Delbrück saw quite early that the division of Europe into two opposing camps would make a future war extremely dangerous for Germany. In September 1897, he published a column in the "*Politisische Correspondenz*" section of the Preußische Jahrbücher on this issue, in which he wrote of the strategic implications of the growing Anglo-German antagonism. To Delbrück, the recent war between Turkey and Greece had confirmed once again the strength of the two power blocs on the Continent. He wrote: "The two blocs, the Dual Alliance and the Triple Alliance, appear to be as far from each other as a decade ago."[62] However, Delbrück felt that the international situation was made all the more perilous by the growing Anglo-German antagonism over trade, which had just been exacerbated by Kaiser Wilhelm's ill-considered telegram to President Kruger of the Transvaal Republic. This antagonism made the prospect of a future war for Germany even more dangerous in Delbrück's opinion. While Germany had hoped Great Britain would fear a Russo-French victory more than a German victory, the situation was clearly changing. Growing German industrial and trade strength made Great Britain feel threatened. Wilhelm's telegram made the situation even worse and made the prospect of Great Britain entering into an alliance with the French and Russians in case of a general European war even more likely. In this essay, Delbrück wrote that if this came to pass the next war could very well be a long, drawn-out affair ("...only the unthinking conclude that the next war will be short merely because the last were..."). Having the British, with their great financial strength and their seapower, for an enemy would therefore be disastrous for Germany.[63]

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[61] Both Paret in his "Hans Delbrück on Military Affairs" and Felix Gilbert in his "From Clausewitz to Delbrück and Hintze" recognize Delbrück's role as a "military commentator." However, neither have examined his analysis of contemporary events.
[62] Hans Delbrück, "Auswärtige Politik; die hohen Staatsvisiten," PJ 90 (Oct-Dec 1897) p.175.
[63] Ibid, pp. 176-177.

In the wake of the Bosnian annexation crisis in 1908, Delbrück returned to this danger of a war stemming from the continuing Anglo-German tension. He declared the position of Great Britain to be crucial in deciding whether or not war was imminent in the wake of the crisis. Delbrück wrote, "England stands today as a special opponent and rival of the German Empire."[64] This condition had come about because the English people were "filled with fear and antipathy against Germany, and fear is perhaps the greatest cause of war throughout world history."[65] He was pessimistic about German chances if faced with war between Germany and Austria on one side and France, Russia, Italy, and Great Britain on the other. Delbrück again stressed that Germany could not count on winning a war quickly, feeling it would be impossible to defeat France before Russian troops posed a significant threat to Germany. While Delbrück felt that Germany and Austria might be able to hold their own in the field against their Continental enemies, he feared with Britain in the war, the conflict would develop into another Seven Years' War, which would lay ruin to much of Europe.[66]

In the years leading up to World War I, Delbrück continued to give similar warnings about the course of a future general European war. For example, in December 1913 he wrote:

> Frankreich ist so gut gerüstet, daß auch bei einem isolierten Waffengang zwischen uns der Erfolg uns sehr hart bestritten werden würde. Wir würden den westlichen Nachbarn gewiß schließlich niederringen, *aber nur nach einem langen, sehr hartnäckigen Widerstand.* Gehen wir in einen französischen Krieg, so haben wir es unzweifelhaft auch mit Rußland und wahrscheinlich auch mit England zu tun.[67]

While Delbrück did not shrink from the prospect of war, he obviously considered it to be a more difficult undertaking than many of his contemporaries. In general, he supported German armaments programs as a means of keeping the peace, but cautioned against going to war lightly.[68] In his December 1913 essay, Delbrück wrote that Germany

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[64] Hans Delbrück, "Danger of War," in Delbrück's Modern Military History, p.91. (Originally published as "Kriegsgefahr," PJ 135 (Jan-Mar 1909) pp. 163-182).
[65] Ibid., p.94.
[66] Ibid., p.97.
[67] Hans Delbrück, "Die Alldeutschen," PJ 154 (Oct-Dec 1913) p.574; Paul Rohrbach, "Delbrück als Prophet," in Daniels and Rühlmann, op.cit., p. 57. Emphasis added.
[68] For example, Hans Delbück, "Die Armee-Reform;" "Die Armee-Vorlage;" and "Heeresstärken," in "Politische Correspondenz," PJ 70 (Jul-Dec 1892).

should only contemplate war when there remained no other way to protect her national honor.[69]

In addition to commenting on the prospective course of a future war while examining the growing tensions in Europe, Delbrück wrote extensively on the course of various conflicts around the world. From these wars, like his contemporaries in the army, he drew conclusions about the possible course of a future European war. The first conflict to come under Delbrück's inspection was the Second Anglo-Boer War. In January 1900, Delbrück wrote, "the Boer War is not only politically an important event, but it also appears that it must also have a great effect on Europe's armies..."[70] In this essay, he went on to examine General Buller's actions at the battle of Colenso and to discuss what he saw as the failings in British strategy and training, as well as the danger from taking false lessons from the war.

Despite the success of the Boers in defensive battles, Delbrück believed that one should not conclude that the defensive had become the decisive form of warfare. Fighting in South Africa had shown clearly just how modern weapons had made overcoming a defender more difficult. However, like many of his contemporaries, Delbrück maintained that defensive action alone could not decide a battle; offensive action was still necessary to bring a battle to its conclusion. He believed that the experiences from South Africa showed that, given the power of modern weapons in the defense, a combination of defensive and offensive action was needed to win battles in future wars. He wrote:

> Der grundsätzliche Werth der Offensive bleibt bestehen; wo es aber irgend angeht, ist auf die Defensiv-Offensive hinzuarbeiten, d.h. Uebergang zur Offensive in dem Augenblicke, wo die Vorteile der Defensive erschöpft sind.[71]

The task of the modern general was to know when that crucial moment had come.

The Russo-Japanese War offered Delbrück another opportunity to comment on contemporary warfare and strategy. After the war's initial encounters, Delbrück wrote that the Russian commander, Alexei Kuropatkin, was obviously not up to date with modern warfare. Delbrück felt Kuropatkin should fight a war based on the strategic ideas of Moltke, i.e., the Russians should launch a concerted attack against the Japanese on

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[69] Delbrück, "Die Alldeutschen," p.575.
[70] Idem, "Die Lehren des Transvaal-Krieges," PJ 99 (Jan-Mar 1900) p.366.
[71] Ibid., p.372.

more than one front at a time.[72] Further, he argued that the Russians had not learned the importance of firepower and relied too greatly on the bayonet.[73] As the war wore on, the lack of decisive battles surprised Delbrück, and this caused him to raise the idea that perhaps the age of *Ermattungsstrategie* had returned. Delbrück made the point that neither the Japanese nor the Russians seemed to have the ability to exploit any battlefield victory they might achieve. In his opinion, if this condition continued, the war would be decided, as in the time of Frederick, "by the side which has the 'last dollar in the wallet' [*wer den letzten Taler in der Tasche behält*], by the side which can maintain half a million soldiers in the field the longest."[74]

Even before the Russo-Japanese War, Delbrück, in a lengthy review of Ivan Bloch's The Future of War, had raised the idea that a return to the days of *Ermattungsstrategie* might be imminent. In general, he rejected Bloch's thesis, believing it still possible to wage war in pursuit of national goals. Delbrück did, however, raise the question of whether future wars would be decided by one or a few great battles. In doing so he wondered whether a return to the 18th century, i.e., *Ermattungsstrategie*, was likely in the future. He wrote:

> Die Feldherren werden es sicherlich erst noch einmal darauf ankommen lassen, *ob das natürliche Gesetz des Krieges, die gewaltsame Vernichtung der feindlichen Streitkraft heute nicht mehr gilt.* Solche Fragen entscheidet entgiltig [sic] schwerlich die Theorie, sondern immer erst die Erfahrung. Aber nehmen wir einmal an, Bloch hätte wirklich recht, so wäre mit der Unmöglichkeit, oder besser gesagt, Zwecklosigkeit von großen Schlachten noch keineswegs dasselbe vom Kriege nachgewiesen. Wir wären erst zurückgedrückt auf den Standpunkt der Strategie des sechzehnten bis achtzehnten Jahrhunderts...und man würde mit dem Kriege der kleinen Mittel, nur bei besonders günstiger Gelegenheit oder stärkster Spannung mit Niederwerfung, sonst aber mit der allmählichen Ermattung des Gegners durchzukommen suchen.[75]

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Contrary to Delbrück's own statements that his views on *Ermattungsstrategie* should be considered purely of historical interest, his writings on contemporary affairs in

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[72] Delbrück cited Caemmerer's Die Entwicklung der strategischen Wissenschaft as his source for the correct interpretation of Moltke's strategic ideas. "Der Krieg," PJ 118 (Oct-Dec 1904) p.557.
[73] Hans Delbrück, "Die Schlacht bei Mukden," PJ 120 (Apr-Jun 1905) pp. 176-177.
[74] Idem, "Der Krieg," PJ 120 (Apr-Jun 1905) p.560. Delbrück had used exactly this phrase – "wer den letzten Taler in der Tasche behählt" – in describing Frederick's strategy. See "Perikles," p.270.
[75] Hans Delbrück, "Zukunftskrieg und Zukunftsfriede," PJ 96 (1899) p.215. Emphasis added.

the "Politische Correspondenz" column of the Preußische Jahrbücher show Delbrück applying his ideas about strategy to current affairs. Delbrück increasingly feared the consequences of a general European war. As Europe went through a series of diplomatic crises in the years before 1914, he concluded that the next war would not be won as quickly as the Wars of Unification; the forces arrayed made such a result impossible. Instead, he came to believe the next war would be long and indecisive – much like Frederick the Great's Seven Years' War.

Delbrück's commentary on international affairs was complemented by his analysis of the various wars which took place before World War I. Delbrück paid particularly close attention to how modern weapons and the size of modern armies changed the nature of war. While examining the Second Anglo-Boer War, Delbrück was inclined to discount the revolutionary effect of modern weapons. The Russo-Japanese War, however, showed quite clearly how warfare had changed from the 1870s. In Manchuria, despite winning great battles (at Mukden, the Japanese inflicted about 100,000 casualties upon the Russians, or one-third of the Russian forces involved), the Japanese were unable to bring about the complete defeat of the Russians. This caused Delbrück to question seriously whether or not in the immediate future Great Powers could be defeated decisively on the battlefield. Events on battlefields around the world reinforced Delbrück's belief that wars of the future might be wars of exhaustion, where the power, or power bloc, with greater resources would be able to stay the course longest and, hence, be winner by default.

Conclusion

Although Hans Delbrück claimed to be merely a military historian and not a military commentator, his long-running debate with the intellectuals of the Wilhelmine army and his analysis of contemporary affairs in the Preußische Jahrbücher proved this assertion to be false. His unique interpretation of the wars of Frederick the Great led him to define a strategic system that was at odds with the view prevalent in the army at the time. Delbrück attempted in his writings to show that the strategy chosen by a *Feldherr* was dictated by the conditions of his age rather than his military genius. Thus, Frederick followed a strategy that was designed not to overthrow his opponents in great battles, like Napoleon and Moltke would do in the 19th century, but to wear down his enemy's ability and will to continue the war through a series of actions. To Frederick, the occupation of

an enemy province would be at times of far greater value than a victorious battle. Delbrück called this strategy, *Ermattungsstrategie*, a name, with its connotations of weakness, that was guaranteed to put off the military.

Delbrück went much further than challenging the military's interpretation of Frederick the Great. He also questioned their reading of Clausewitz, whose Vom Kriege served as the intellectual basis for their view of *Vernichtungsstrategie* since it was brought to prominence by Moltke the Elder. Delbrück claimed to have derived his concept of *Ermattungsstrategie* from Clausewitz' writings. If his strident criticisms of the army's view of Frederick was not enough to set military writers against him, his view of Clausewitz offered a direct challenge to the military's competence that could not be ignored.

Delbrück also turned his penetrating eye to contemporary affairs in his column in the Preußische Jahrbücher. Reading these columns shows several important things. First, Delbrück's analysis of the alliance system in Europe led him to believe that a general European war could not be won quickly. By the early years of the 20th century, he recognized that the size of armies involved would prohibit a rapid, decisive victory. Further, with Great Britain allied with Germany's enemies, Germany would face the difficulties of naval blockade as well as an indecisive land conflict. With this being the case, Delbrück feared the consequence of any war. These conclusions were reinforced by his analysis of contemporary conflicts. The course of the Anglo-Boer War and of the Russo-Japanese War provided further worrying evidence about the course of future conflicts. Although he was always careful in how he phrased it, Delbrück believed that a future war would in all likelihood require Germany to follow a strategy of attrition much like Frederick had been forced to do in the Seven Years' War.

The effects of Delbrück's 35-year *Strategiestreit* with the intellectuals of the Wilhelmine army are of course difficult to measure. The debate certainly achieved prominence in pre-World War I Germany and beyond. By the early 1890s, it had spilled from specialized journals to the pages of national newspapers and it had involved most of Germany's important military intellectuals. Additionally, it is clear from the files of Delbrück's correspondence that he carried on his debates in private as well as in public with a good number of German officers.[76] Further, the *Streit* coincided with the growing

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[76] The Delbrück Nachlass at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin contains letters from Paul Bronsart von Schellendorf, Rudolph von Caemmerer, Colmar von der Goltz, Fritz Hoenig, Max Jähns, Egon von Gayl,

doubts of some of Germany's strategic planners, most notably Moltke the Elder and Moltke the Younger. While it is clear that by the outbreak of World War I Delbrück had brought a number of writers around to his side, especially regarding his historical analysis, many opponents still existed. Even with doubts, however, the German military on the whole was not ready to jettison its reliance on great battles to destroy their opponents, and could not ultimately see beyond this aspect of Delbrück's *Ermattungsstrategie*.

There were a number of important consequences of this debate. First, it forced the German army as a whole to re-examine its assumptions about warfare. Even if they rejected most of Delbrück's analysis, they were nevertheless exposed to an opposing point of view. That Delbrück was allowed to voice his opinions in army journals shows that at least some soldiers believed the debate was a worthwhile exercise.[77] Further, this debate prepared the groundwork for an intellectual shift that had to take place after the failure of Germany's short-war strategy in 1914. Many of Delbrück's concepts, combined with the ideas of Moltke the Elder and Goltz, would resurface in the strategy of Erich von Falkenhayn during his tenure as Chief of the General Staff.

Sigismund von Schlichting, and Alfred von Schlieffen to name a few of the more prominent. See Horst Wolf, Der Nachlass Hans Delbrück (Berlin: Deutsche Staatsbibliothek, 1980).

[77] In 1887, "*Premierlieutenant a.D.*" Hans Delbrück published an essay on Frederick the Great in an supplement to the General Staff's official journal. "Ueber den Feldzugsplan Friedrichs des Grossen im Jahre 1757," Beiheft zum Militär-Wochenblatt 1887.

Chapter Three:
Schlieffen, Moltke the Younger, and the Short War Belief

Over 80 years since his death, *Generalfeldmarschall* Alfred Graf von Schlieffen remains one of Imperial Germany's most intriguing figures. Schlieffen's 15 years as Chief of the Great General Staff left his stamp not just on the *Kaiserheer* but also on the *Reichswehr* and the *Wehrmacht*. Despite never having written a comprehensive work of theory (his ideas are scattered throughout his official documents and in a few short articles published after his retirement), he has inspired countless books and articles in support of his ideas and many which argue that his theories brought ruin to Germany and much of Europe. Certainly, few personalities in Wilhelmine Germany have provoked as much ink, and as much acrimony, as Alfred von Schlieffen.

Following World War I, the memory of Alfred von Schlieffen and his strategic ideas was elevated to almost mythic heights. (Culminating, perhaps, with the foundation of a *Schlieffenverein* in 1921.[1]) Many of the officers who had served under Schlieffen felt that had the German army followed his teachings during the war, defeat would not have occurred. The books written by these men in the Interwar period aimed at propagating their interpretation of Schlieffen's ideas, with the design of preventing another occurrence of *Stellungskrieg*. That many of these officers had risen to great prominence

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[1] See Theo Schwarzmüller, Zwischen Kaiser und 'Führer': Generalfeldmarschall August von Mackensen (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1995) p.208f.

during World War I lent credence to their assertions.[2] After the war, Schlieffen was venerated as "one of the greatest soldiers who had ever lived."[3]

In reaction to these hagiographical studies, accepted opinion of Schlieffen and his ideas has swung in the opposite direction. In 1956 Gerhard Ritter published his study of the Schlieffen plan, which he subtitled "Critique of a Myth."[4] Jehuda Wallach followed with his even more biting critique in 1967.[5] Both men saw Schlieffen as dogmatic and blind to the strategic realities of his day. They place upon him, as the author of the famous "Schlieffen Plan," the blame for Germany's adherence to the short-war belief. It is these critical interpretations of Ritter and Wallach which today represent the "accepted" view of Schlieffen.[6]

Yet despite the volumes written about him (or perhaps because of), Schlieffen and his strategic ideas remain in many ways paradoxical. For instance, Schlieffen and his followers adamantly denied that he sought to establish a school of his own within military theory. As late as the 1960s, German historians found it necessary to establish that a distinct Schlieffen school of thought existed.[7] However, his ideas clearly

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[2] For examples of this work, see Wilhelm Groener, Das Testament des Grafen Schlieffen (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1930); Idem, Feldherr wider Willen: Operative Studien über den Weltkrieg (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1931); Wolfgang Foerster, Graf Schlieffen und der Weltkrieg (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1925); Idem, Aus der Gedankenwerkstatt des Deutschen Generalstabes (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1931); Eugen Ritter von Zoellner, 'Schlieffens Vermächtnis,' MWR, Sonderheft, Jg.1938; and Hans von Seeckt, Gedanken eines Soldaten (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1929).

[3] Erich Ludendorff, Meine Kriegserinnerungen 1914-1918 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1919) p.18.

[4] Gerhard Ritter, Der Schlieffenplan: Kritik eines Mythos (Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1956). Published in English as The Schlieffen Plan: Critique of a Myth (London: Oswald Wolff, 1958).

[5] Jehuda L. Wallach, Das Dogma der Vernichtungsschlacht: Die Lehren von Clausewitz und Schlieffen und ihre Wirkungen in zwei Weltkriegen (Frankfurt: Bernard und Graefe, 1967). Published in English as The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986).

[6] For similar views see, Jay Luvaas, "European Military Thought and Doctrine, 1870-1914," in Michael Howard, ed. The Theory and Practice of War (London: Cassell, 1965) pp. 71-77; L.L. Farrar, Jr., "The Short War Illusion: The Syndrome of German Strategy, August – December, 1914," MGM 2/72 pp. 39-52; Martin Kitchen, "The Traditions of German Strategic Thought," International History Review 1/ 2 (April 1979) pp. 163-190; Stephan van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," International Security Vol.9 Nr.1 (1984) pp. 58-107; Gunther Rothenberg, "Moltke, Schlieffen, and the Doctrine of Strategic Envelopment," in Peter Paret, ed. The Makers of Modern Strategy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) pp. 296-325; Holger Herwig, The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918 (London: Arnold, 1997) pp. 46-52.

[7] See Emanuel von Kiliani, "Die Operationslehre des Grafen von Schlieffen und ihre deutschen Gegner," Wehrkunde H.2 and H.3 Jg.X (1961), pp. 71-76, 133-138.

influenced a generation of general staff officers greatly. Through his staff rides and tactical problems, he tried to inculcate the officers of the General Staff with a type of "system," which promised, if it was followed, victory. Additionally, his infamous plan called for the *Feldherr* to exercise firm control over the *Feldheer*, and even prescribed phase lines the advancing army was to reach. Yet in his staff rides and autumn maneuvers, Schlieffen consistently allowed junior officers the freedom of action to act as they saw fit. And last, the Schlieffen Plan called for immediate offensive at the war's outbreak. While in his last *Kriegsspiel*, Schlieffen displayed restraint and stood on the defensive until the enemies' plans became clear, rather than rushing headlong into the offensive.

Perhaps most intriguing, however, was his continued adherence to the belief that Germany could fight and win a short war. This belief was reflected in the plan he bequeathed to his successor, Helmuth von Moltke the Younger. Why, despite the evidence of the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War and of the critiques offered by Hans Delbrück, did Schlieffen and Moltke the Younger not come up with a plan that reflected Germany's strategic realities more accurately? This chapter will attempt to provide some reasons for this. First, it shall examine the lessons drawn from the Wars of Unification by the German army and show the influence these had on Schlieffen's strategic thought. Last, it shall examine how these ideas combined with Schlieffen and Moltke the Younger's reading of the strategic situation to form their plans for war.

Schlieffen's Operational Ideas

Following the Franco Prussian War, great debates raged within the German army about the tactical and operational lessons to be drawn from the conflict.[8] Although there were many variations, the results of these debates was a general consensus on how the

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[8] Space prevents a discussion of these debates. For an introduction see Heinz-Ludger Borgert, "Grundzüge der Landkriegführung von Schlieffen bis Guderian," in Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, ed. Handbuch zur deutschen Militärgeschichte 1648-1939 Vol.IX (Munich: Bernard & Graefe, 1979), pp. 427-480; "Taktik der Infantrie und die Thätigkeit der verbundenen Waffen, 1874-98" in [Gerhard] von Pelet-Narbonne, ed. Von Löbell's Jahresberichte über die Veränderungen und Fortschritte im Militärwesen Jg. XXV (1898), pp. 549-592; and Antulio J. Echevarria II, "A Crisis in Warfighting: German Tactical Discussions in the Late Nineteenth Century," MGM 55 (1996) pp. 51-68. See also Bruce Gudmundsson and John English, On Infantry (Revised Edition) (London: Praeger, 1994) pp. 1-13, for the tactical debate in a wider historical context.

German army was to fight, a "doctrine" of sorts. This operational doctrine was based upon what most observers saw as Germany's traditional approach to war as demonstrated by Moltke the Elder in the Wars of Unification. It consisted of defeating an enemy in rapid, mobile campaigns – *Bewegungskrieg*.

Although Schlieffen was not a participant in the tactical and operational dialogue that followed the Franco-Prussian War, he nonetheless was influenced by it. Like his contemporaries, Schlieffen had to come to grips with the great changes in war (expansion of armies and theaters of war, lethality of modern weapons, changes in command and control, etc.) demonstrated in the years after 1871. Like all responsible officers, Schlieffen wrestled with exactly how these changes would effect future conflicts. A close reading of his writings indicates that his operational thought was based firmly in the ideas current in the German army after the Wars of Unification, and that Schlieffen even based his ideas on those of his contemporaries.[9]

As with most of his contemporaries, probably the idea central to Schlieffen's thinking was the desirability of an annihilating, decisive battle, as Wallach so forcefully points out.[10] Everything else was focused on achieving this goal. That Schlieffen and many of his contemporaries chose to follow the model of decisive battle from the Franco-Prussian War should not be too surprising. From the military standpoint, Königgrätz and Sedan were certainly crucial, if not decisive, in ending both wars. During his tenure as Chief of the General Staff, he constantly taught the importance of the decisive battle in ending a war quickly, what he regarded as Moltke's legacy to the German army. Schlieffen was certainly not alone in this belief. As Chapter 2 has shown, this concept of *Vernichtungsstrategie* was shared by most of his contemporaries.

To Schlieffen, Germany's next war would *have* to be solved on the battlefield. He believed that Germany would have to fight a short war as the costs of a long war to the

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[9] Schlieffen never set down his thoughts about warfare in a single source. His ideas can be gleaned from his *Kriegsspiele* and his critiques of maneuvers published by the General Staff in the Interwar period. Out of a planned three volumes, two were published. Alfred von Schlieffen, Dienstschriften Vol.I: Die taktisch-strategischen Aufgaben (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1937) and Dienstschriften Vol.II: Generalstabsreisen – Ost (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1938). His post-retirement writings offer another source of Schlieffen's ideas. These were collected and published in a single volume after his death. Alfred von Schlieffen, Cannae (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1925).

[10] Wallach, op.cit., pp.41ff.

economy and society would be too great for the nation to bear.[11] He believed that a long war such as the Russo-Japanese War would be impossible in western Europe:

> Solche Kriege sind aber zu einer Zeit unmöglich, wo die Existenz der Nation auf einen ununterbrochenen Fortgang des Handels und der Industrie begründet ist, und durch eine rasche Entscheidung das zum Stillstand gebrachte Räderwerk wieder in Lauf gebracht werden muss. Eine Ermattungsstrategie lässt sich nicht treiben, wenn der Unterhalt von Millionen den Aufwand von Millarden erfordert.[12]

Not only was the idea of the decisive battle elevated, but Schlieffen had definite ideas as to how this battle was to take place. Towards the beginning of his time as Chief of the General Staff, Schlieffen believed different forms of attacks, such as breakthroughs, could be used to defeat an enemy on the battlefield.[13] As his tenure progressed, however, Schlieffen increasingly stressed envelopment, i.e., surrounding one's enemy completely, as the only way of annihilating enemy's forces and thus achieving decisive victory. He preached this form of attack repeatedly to his subordinates, especially during his staff rides and maneuvers[14] (leading some disgruntled officers to claim an "*Umfassungssucht*" had taken over the German army).[15] Ultimately to Schlieffen any other form of attack offered only limited chance of success and would lead only to an "ordinary" victory.[16] Schlieffen applied this form of attack to all levels of action from the tactical to the strategic.

At the tactical level, Schlieffen's emphasis on enveloping attacks had its roots, in part, in the increased lethality of weapons. The Franco-Prussian War and subsequent wars had shown that frontal attacks were terribly costly in casualties, and the German army had learned this lesson well. At the battle of St. Privat on 18 August 1870, the 1st Prussian Guard Division had attacked a dug-in French force frontally. They were able to advance to within 600 yards of the French positions before being stopped cold by the fire

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[11] Schlieffen, Dienstschriften II, p.171; Ritter, Schlieffen Plan, pp. 46-47.
[12] Schlieffen, "Der Krieg in der Gegenwart," Cannae, p.280.
[13] For example, see his concluding remarks to the 1894 and 1899 *Generalstabsreisen.* Schlieffen, Dienstschriften II, p.50, 164. See also *Oberstleutnant* Brückner, "Der Durchbruchsangriff vor dem Weltkriege in Anwendung und Theorie," MWR Jg.5 H.5 (1938) pp. 586-601.
[14] Schlieffen, Dienstschriften II, pp. 40, 167, 302.
[15] Sigfrid Mette, Vom Geist deutscher Feldherren: Genie und Technik 1800-1918 (Zurich: Scientia, 1938) p.197; Wallach, op.cit., pp. 80-81; Kitchen, op.cit., p.173.
[16] Wallach, op.cit., p.45.

of the defenders. Repeated attempts to resume the advance were beaten back by French fire. The Prussian troops were stuck under the French guns for hours before the situation was rescued by the arrival of the Royal Saxon Corps. The Saxons attacked the French flank and routed them, suffering only minor casualties in the process. The Prussians, on the other hand, had taken horrible casualties, losing over 8,000 men in the first 20 minutes of the assault.[17] The results of this battle were long remembered within the German army, and many of Schlieffen's contemporaries advocated flank attacks as means of keeping casualties to a minimum.[18] Schlieffen's advocacy of the envelopment was an improvement on this idea. A properly executed envelopment offered increased prospects of crushing an enemy force completely.[19]

In order to achieve his short war, Schlieffen intended also to make the German army at once more flexible and more responsive to the guiding hand of its *Feldherr*. To this end, he drew heavily upon the ideas of Sigismund von Schlichting.[20] A prominent participant in the various tactical and operational debates after 1871, Schlichting had developed the concept of *Begegnungsgefecht* [encounter battle] as one way to overcome the difficulties posed by the increased power of the defensive.[21]

Drawing on Moltke's conduct of the Wars of Unification, Schlichting envisioned future German armies advancing over many separate roads. These armies would be close

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[17] For a description of the battle see Grosser Generalstab, Der deutsch-französische Krieg 1870-71 Vol.1 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1874) pp. 866-881; and Michael Howard The Franco-Prussian War (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961) pp 167-176. This engagement became probably the most written about battle before World War I, and prompted much consideration about firepower and tactics. For examples, see Grosser Generalstab, Studien zur Kriegsgeschichte und Taktik V: Der 18 August 1870 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1906) and Oberst von Schack, "Der Angriff der Garde auf St. Privat," Beihefte zum Militär-Wochenblatt H.6-7 (1901).

[18] For example, see Sigismund von Schlichting, "Ueber das Infanteriegefecht," Beiheft zum Militär-Wochenblatt H.2 (1879), pp. 38-39; Colmar Freiherr von der Goltz, The Nation in Arms (London: Hugh Rees, 1906) pp.295ff; Ludwig Freiherr von Falkenhausen, Flankenbewegung und Massenheer (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1911).

[19] Schlieffen, Dienstschriften II, p.302, 309.

[20] The two men are often seen as intellectual rivals (See Mette, op.cit., pp. 163-220, passim; and Daniel J. Hughes, "Schlichting, Schlieffen, and the Prussian Theory of War in 1914," Journal of Military History 59 (April 1995) pp. 257-278). The following shall demonstrate that, in fact, their views shared many similarities.

[21] For Schlichting's career see Egon Freiherr von Gayl, General von Schlichting und sein Lebenswerk (Berlin: Georg Stilke, 1913); and Kurt von Priesdorff, ed. Soldatisches Führertum (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1936-1942) pp. 444-452. For an examination of his thought see Joachim Hoffmann, "Die Kriegslehre des Generals von Schlichting," MGM 1/69 pp. 5-35; and Donald Cranz, Understanding Change: Sigismund von Schlichting and the Operational Level of War (Fort Leavenworth: School of Advanced Military Studies Monograph, 1989).

enough for mutual support but far enough apart that the enemy could not surround them with his own widely spread forces. Schlichting believed that a combination of the telegraph and *Auftragstaktik* would enable a commander to concentrate his dispersed forces quickly. He felt that the Wars of Unification had shown that an army operating on the classical principle of "interior lines" believing that it could fall on its enemy's spread out forces would be defeated. Instead, Schlichting held that future operations should be conducted from "exterior lines." Only by concentrating once an enemy had concentrated could victory be achieved. Armies on exterior lines had the room to maneuver their large forces. This allowed one's armies to exploit flanks and engage the enemy with mutually supporting, if geographically separate, attacks.[22]

Schlichting believed also that modern weapons had changed the tactical environment greatly. As modern weapons had made movement in the face of the enemy difficult,[23] he felt that commanders should respond one of two ways depending on circumstances. No longer did armies simply march to a battle and have the time to assemble before an attack, as in the days of Napoleon. The range and accuracy of small arms and artillery had made this impossible. Schlichting declared, "a 2000 meter clear field of fire held frontally…is the strongest position imaginable."[24] As a way of reacting to the changes in weapons, Schlichting believed that a distinction should be made between two types of battles: a *Begegnungsgefecht* and a *geplanter Angriff* (planned or deliberate attack).[25]

Before the Franco-Prussian War, surprise encounters with the enemy were avoided as much as possible. Contrariwise, the *Begegnungsgefecht* sought to exploit these surprise encounters. Schlichting realized that an enemy in a prepared position

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[22] Sigismund von Schlichting, Taktische und strategische Grunsätze der Gegenwart Vol. II: Truppenführung. Erstes Buch: Die Operationen (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1898) pp.15-25; and Rudolph von Caemmerer, Die Entwicklung der strategischen Wissenschaft im 19. Jahrhundert (Berlin: Wilhelm Baensch, 1904) pp. 249-252.

[23] Schlichting, "Infanteriegefecht," p.38.

[24] Schlichting, Grundsätze II, p.55.

[25] This concept of "*geplanter Angriff*" was not widely accepted by the Wilhelmine army and was, in fact, heavily attacked by Schlichting's contemporaries. See Wilhelm Scheff, Der Schlachtangriff im Lichte der Schlichting'schen 'Taktischen Grundsätze' und der Bogusawski'schen 'Betrachtungen.' Ein kritischer Vergleich (Berlin: R.Eisenschmidt, 1898); Hugo Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven, "Friedensarbeit und Kriegslehren," Beiheft zum Militär-Wochenblatt (1899); Alfred von Boguslawski, Stragische Erörterungen beteffend die vom General von Schlichting vertretenen Grundsätze (Berlin: R. Eisenschmidt, 1901).

would be much harder to defeat and would be able to inflict heavy casualties on an attacking force. If, however, the enemy force could be engaged before it had the opportunity to prepare defensive positions or even before it had time to deploy from marching to combat order, it could be defeated easier. Schlichting felt that the army should be able to engage an enemy immediately upon discovering its whereabouts, shifting from march to attack fluidly. He wrote:

> Der Uebertritt von Marsch zu Gefecht hat im Angriffsverfahren überall da, wo nicht eine vorbereite Stellung der Bewegung entgegentritt, ohne Absatz zu erfolgen, weil der vorgängige Aufmarsch in grossen Verhältnissen allein eine Tagesleistung in Anspruch nimmt.[26]

This concept relied heavily upon the system of *Auftragstaktik*.[27] Subordinate commanders would have to use their initiative and engage the enemy, without waiting for orders. Higher commanders would have to weld many disparate actions into a homogeneous battle.[28] It also necessitated doing away with, or at least altering, march formations to allow them to deploy rapidly to attack formations. This merged, or at the very least blurred, the distinction between what had hitherto been two distinct phases of German operations – the marching[29] and combat stages.

Schlieffen also felt that the German army could no longer afford to make a distinction between marching order and tactical formation. However, he carried Schlichting's idea perhaps a step further. The General Staff Chief conceived of battle actually being initiated at deployment. As German units no longer distinguished between marching and battle order, the position of the units from deployment determined when and where they would enter combat. This being so, Schlieffen maintained that battle actually began at deployment, a concept he termed "*Gesamtschlacht*."[30] This idea made the plan of attack all the more important. He wrote:

> Der Anmarsch zur Schlacht beginnt, sobald die Truppen die Eisenbahn verlassen haben. Von den Endbahnhöfen aus werden Korps und Divisionen, die einen den

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[26] Schlichting, Grundsätze II, p.94.
[27] For the development of *Auftragstaktik* see Martin Samuels, "Directive Command and the German General Staff," War in History 2 (1) (1995) pp. 22-42.
[28] Schlichting, Grundsätze II, p.94.
[29] The term "*Operationen*" was used to denote troop movements when not in contact with the enemy. From this comes the term "operational level" so important in World War II. Cranz, op.cit., pp. 17-21.
[30] See Herbert Rosinski, The German Army (Washington: The Infantry Journal, 1944) p.85; and Wallach, op.cit., p.56.

Marsch beschleunigend, die anderen etwas verhaltend, den Platz zu erreichen suchen, der ihnen in Schlachtordnung angewiesen ist. Da die Gefechtsfronten sich verbreiten, so werden auch die dem Schlachtfeld zustrebenden Kolonnen mindestens in der nämlichen Breite marschieren können, die sie im Gefecht einnehmen sollen. Das Zusammenziehen zur Schlacht wird an Bedeutung verlieren. Diejenigen Korps, welche auf die Feind stossen, werden den Kampf, ohne auf weitere Unterstützung zu rechen, durchführen müssen.[31]

Schlieffen believed that a properly formulated plan ensured that the enemy would be forced into a bad tactical position right from deployment.

Schlieffen also had strong ideas about how to control the execution of the plan better. He wrote that the place of the *Feldherr* in future war would be comfortably behind the lines, ensconced at a desk, where he would be surrounded by the elements of modern communication. The modern *Feldherr* would use the telegraph, telephone, and motorcar to receive information from his units in the field and to issue his orders to them. From this position, the "modern Alexander" could survey the entire battle on a constantly up-dated map.[32]

Schlieffen's view of the importance of the plan and of the place of the *Feldherr* has often been criticized, by contemporaries and by more recent historians, as being far too mechanical and far too restrictive for subordinates, and thus out of step with Moltke's system of *Auftragstaktik.* Schlieffen's contemporary, Friedrich von Bernhardi, thought that his approach called for a "drill-like advance." Bernhardi expected at anytime to hear: "Army Commanders: Would you, please, align your men and put out 'right markers'!"[33] Bernhardi was not the only contemporary of Schlieffen who was critical. Schlichting also felt that Schlieffen had overstepped the bounds of *Auftragstaktik.*[34]

How does one reconcile Schlieffen's apparently restrictive control of the army with his habit of allowing subordinates maximum latitude during his staff rides and maneuvers? Perhaps one can find an answer by looking at the same source which was used to formulate his other operational ideas – the German experience in the Franco-Prussian War. Moltke's approach to command during the war allowed his army

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[31] Schlieffen, "Der Krieg in der Gegenwart," pp. 278-279.
[32] Ibid., p.278. Other German officers shared similar views. See Schlichting, Grundsätze II, p.24.
[33] Wallach, op.cit., p.53.
[34] Gayl, op.cit., pp. 354-355 and Walter Goerlitz, History of the German General Staff 1657-1945 (trans. Brian Battershaw) (New York: Praeger, 1957) pp. 136-137.

commanders great freedom of maneuver. He only wanted them to conform to his overall campaign plan. However, even this seemingly simple request proved a challenge. Moltke had great difficulty in getting his subordinates, especially Steinmetz, to recognize his authority and to conform to his directions. (Indeed, Steinmetz was eventually dismissed for his inability to follow orders.)[35] This difficulty sometimes resulted in battles when Moltke would have preferred to avoid them and caused Moltke to alter his campaign plan on a number of occasions. While this had been possible during the Franco-Prussian War, Schlieffen believed it would be fatal in a future war, which demanded coordination of the entire army to effect a quick victory.[36] This co-ordination would be difficult with corps and army commanders who held such autonomous positions. Indeed, Schlieffen was not alone in this belief. As Chapter 1 has shown, authors such as Fritz Hoenig also shared his fears.

In addition to the general experience of the war, Schlieffen's personal experience may have influenced his views on the role of the *Feldherr*. When war between France and Prussia broke out in July 1870, Schlieffen was assigned to the staff of the Grand Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin's corps, who were initially given the task of defending Germany from a possible Danish attack. When it became clear that Denmark would remain neutral and, given French resistance, that the war in France would require many more troops, Mecklenburg-Schwerin's troops were transported to the theater of war. Once there, they were given the task of tracking down and destroying the improvised forces of the French provisional government, a task which proved more difficult than anticipated.[37]

The Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin's troops, and with them Schlieffen, were sent against these newly raised armies. While the new French armies were nowhere near the quality of the German troops, their destruction gave the Germans some difficulty. The German forces in France were over-stretched as they tried to maintain their investment of Paris, to guard their extended supply lines from Germany against partisan attacks, and to destroy the new French armies. They were operating in a hostile environment against an enemy who had the support of the population, knew the terrain well, and who was

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[35] Howard, op.cit., pp. 83-85.
[36] Schlieffen, Dienstschriften II, p.179. See also his "Der Feldherr," in Cannae, pp. 264-272.
[37] Friedrich von Boetticher, Schlieffen (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1957) pp.29ff.

constantly reinforced. The task of defeating the improvised French armies was made more difficult by the fact that Mecklenburg-Schwerin appears to have been ill-suited to Moltke's *Auftragstaktik.* Without direction from above, he seemed to dither and the operation suffered.[38] In a letter to his wife from France, Schlieffen enclosed a map showing the marching to and fro carried out by his corps from 9 November 1870 to 26 January 1871.[39] The lines on the map crisscross showing the difficulty the corps faced in hunting down their French prey. In another letter, Schlieffen complained about the seemingly endless and pointless marching the corps faced.[40] Clearly, his experience of war under the direction of a poor commander was a further influence of Schlieffen's ideas about command.

Schlieffen believed, like most of his contemporaries, that proper operational techniques would allow the German army to repeat Moltke's battlefield successes of the Wars of Unification, and this belief served as one of the bases for his plan of 1905. Although Schlieffen had his own ideas about how battles should be conducted, his concepts were firmly based in the orthodoxy of the day. To him, his operational ideas, if followed, increased the chances of a battlefield victory for Germany.

Schlieffen and Germany's Strategic Situation

As we have seen, a central theme of Schlieffen's strategy was that Germany would fight and win a short war. This concept was embodied in his plan of 1906 and was accepted by his successor Helmuth von Moltke the Younger. However, it is clear that Schlieffen had his doubts about the ability of his plan to succeed. Regardless, he stuck with a plan of operations that assumed Germany would be able to defeat France quickly and dictate peace terms before turning on Russia. While the operational doctrine developed within the German army after the Franco-Prussian War served as one basis for this plan, Germany's strategic situation served as another.

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[38] See Howard, op.cit., pp. 299-304 and Lonsdale Hale, The 'People's War' in France 1870-1871 (London: Hugh Rees, 1904).
[39] Schlieffen to his wife, 10 February 1871, USNA, Schlieffen Papers (Microform Series M-961), Roll 8.
[40] Schlieffen to his sister, 25 November 1870, USNA, M-961, Roll 8. This letter was also included in Alfred von Schlieffen, Briefe (ed. Eberhard Kessel), (Göttingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1958).

Schlieffen was well aware of the strategic difficulties facing Germany. He clearly believed that Germany could not win a long, two-front war. Faced with enemies on all sides who could potentially mobilize far greater resources than Germany, he had to find a way to defeat at least one enemy swiftly. Until 1905, this was a tall order. In the east, Germany faced an enemy who, in addition to possessing an extremely large army, had the territory to trade for time. If faced with encirclement and defeat, Russian forces could always withdraw into the interior of their vast empire. Further, the poor road and rail network in the east meant that German forces lacked the strategic mobility necessary to carry out large-scale operations.[41] These difficulties caused Schlieffen to conclude that no quick decision could be reached in the east.

However, the situation in the west was different. There, the French army was not as large as its Russian counterpart and it did not possess the space available in Russia. This offered some scope for a repetition of Moltke the Elder's victories of 1870. However, there were problems with this. Following their defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, the French had gone to great lengths to fortify their border with Germany. Already in 1879, Moltke the Elder complained that this "hermetically sealed" border would make a German breakthrough extremely costly.[42] The French had adopted a defensive strategy, and intended to wait behind their strong border fortifications for a German offensive.[43] This meant that in order to defeat the French, the Germans would have to advance into France. The French forts, however, ensured that a breakthrough would take time, a luxury Germany did not possess after the Franco-Russian Military Convention of 1892. While the German army was occupied breaking through the fortified border, the Russian army would have the time to mobilize and fall upon the vulnerable German rear. Even if the German army could break through quickly, it would still take time to defeat the French army in the field, again allowing the Russians sufficient time to invade from the east.

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[41] Ritter, Schlieffen Plan, pp.25ff; Dennis Showalter, "The Eastern Front and German Military Planning, 1871-1914 – Some Observations," East European Quarterly Vol.XV, Nr.2 (June 1981) pp. 163-180.
[42] Kaiser Wilhelm I to Bismarck, 2 October 1879, reprinted in Ferdinand von Schmerfeld, ed. Graf Moltke. Die Aufmarschpläne 1871-1890 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1929), p.80.
[43] Ritter wrote that "Schlieffen guessed the enemy's intentions with astonishing accuracy" in 1905. Ritter, Schlieffen Plan, p.42. In fact German, intelligence had obtained portions of the French deployment plans, which gave them an accurate picture of Plans XIV and XV (1898-1906). Archivrat Greiner, "Welche

In 1895, *Generalmajor* Martin Köpke, an *Oberquartiermeister* in the General Staff, wrote a *Denkschrift* assessing the problems of a war against France. He recognized the difficulties the Germans would face in breaking through the border. He believed that the attackers could only expect minor successes after expending great effort over a long period of time. Given the strategic situation, Köpke was pessimistic about German chances in a future war, writing:

> Jedenfalls sprechen Anzeichen genug dafür, dass der Krieg der Zukunft ein anderes Aussehen, als der von 1870/71 haben wird. Schnelle Siege von entscheidender Bedeutung haben wir nicht zu erwarten....Der Positionskrieg im Grossen, der Kampf um lange Fronten befestigter Feldstellungen, die Belagerung grosser fester Plätze muss siegreich durchgeführt werden. Anders werden wir keine Erfolge über die Franzosen erringen können. Hoffentlich wird es uns dann nicht an den hierzu nötigen Vorbereitungen in intellektueller wie materieller Hinsicht fehlen und werden wir uns im entscheidenden Augenblick für diese Kampfesform wohl vorgeübt und ausgerüstet sehn.[44]

Until 1905, when he began work on his eponymous plan, Schlieffen struggled to find a satisfactory way out of this strategic dilemma. His solution seemed to be to concentrate on improving the operational capabilities of the German army so that it would be able to fight more effectively than its enemies. The events of 1904/05, however, gave him hope that there was a strategic solution to Germany's dilemma. In 1904, Russia and Japan had gone to war in Korea. While most in Europe expected a quick Russian victory once their army had reached the east,[45] the war, in fact, was a fiasco for the Russian army. Through the war, both sides grappled indecisively with one another, generally with the Russians coming off the worse. Slowly they were pushed deeper into Manchuria, and after losing Port Arthur and their Baltic Fleet in the battle of Tsushima and facing rebellion at home, the Russians were forced to come to a peace with

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Nachrichten besass der deut. GGS über Mobilmachung und Aufmarsch des franz. Heeres in den Jahren 1885-1914," unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/50267.

[44] Martin Köpke, "Eine deutsche Offensive gegen Frankreich nach ihren Bedingungen, Richtungen und Aussichten," August 1895, quoted in [Wilhelm] Dieckmann, "Der Schlieffenplan," unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/50220, p.55. This passage was also quoted in Stig Förster, "Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges, 1871-1914. Metakritik eines Mythos," MGM 54 (1995) p.75. (My thanks to Dr. Annika Mombauer for the use of her copy of the Dieckmann manuscript.)

[45] Helmuth von Moltke, Erinnerungen, Briefe, Dokumente, 1877-1916 (Stuttgart: Der Kommende Tag, 1922) p.300.

Japan. Russian losses had been substantial. At the battle of Mukden alone, the Russian army lost over 100,000 men.

The course of the war had a profound impact on Schlieffen's appreciation of Russian capabilities and, hence, on Germany's strategic situation.[46] In June 1905, Schlieffen wrote a long letter to the Chancellor describing the poor state of the Russian army. "For a long time," he wrote, "we have known that the Russian army possessed no effective leaders, that the majority of its officers were only of the most limited value, and that the troops had only limited training [*Ausbildung*]." However, Schlieffen wrote that most had believed these shortcomings would be compensated to a certain degree by the steadiness and loyalty of the Russian troops. The war in the east had shown that this belief was false. Reportedly, Russian troops had little respect for their officers and did not obey orders. Further, the war had shown that their training was even worse than had been believed. Schlieffen concluded that the worth of the Russian army was minimal and that there was no prospect of it becoming an effective fighting force anytime in the near future:

> Es hat sich durch den ostasiatischen Krieg gezeigt, dass die russische Armee noch weniger gut war, als sie in der allgemeinen Meinung eingeschätzt wurde, und sie ist durch den Krieg nicht besser, sondern schlechter geworden. Sie hat jede Freudigkeit, jedes Vertauen und den Gehorsam verloren.
>
> Es ist durchaus fraglich, ob eine Besserung eintreten wird. Dazu fehlt vor allem die Selbsterkenntnis. Die Ursache ihrer Niederlagen suchen die Russen nicht in den allgemeinen eigenen Unvollkommenheiten, sondern in der Ueberlegenheit an Zahl der Gegner und in der Unfähigkeit einzelner Führer. Es fehlt aber auch an den Männern, welche eine Reform durchzuführen vermöchten und an den notwendigen moralischen Begriffen.[47]

Schlieffen's belief in the weakness of the Russian army now allowed him to contemplate seriously strategic options which had seemed unfeasible until this time. A window of opportunity had opened.[48] Schlieffen now felt that the bulk of the German army could be deployed in the west, with only a small force necessary in the east to

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[46] The idea that Schlieffen "as chief of staff had never felt able to ignore the Russian threat..." seems to be false in the light of his statements about the worth of the Russian army. Dennis Showalter, Tannenberg: Clash of Empires (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991) p.59.

[47] Schlieffen to Bernhard von Bülow, 10 June 1905, PRO, GFM 10/89 (Russland 72geh./14: "Militär und Marine Angelegenheiten Russland, 3 Oct 1896 – 31 Dez 1906").

[48] Peter Rassow, "Schlieffen und Holstein," HZ Bd.173 (1952) pp. 297-313; Cf. Ritter, Schlieffen Plan, p.46.

defend against a greatly weakened and flawed Russian army. Given that the French intended to remain on the defensive, protected behind their fortifications, Schlieffen needed to find a way to get at their army. Köpke's *Denkschrift* had painted a grim picture of how an attack through the French forts would develop and had reinforced an opinion already held by Schlieffen in 1891.[49] Thus, Schlieffen turned to one of his favorite operational concepts, a flanking maneuver.

The result was the *Denkschrift*, "Krieg gegen Frankreich," or the "Schlieffen Plan" as it later became known, which Schlieffen completed in time for his retirement at the end of 1905. This document was taken up by Moltke the Younger and served as the basis for Germany's war plan from 1906 to 1914. Schlieffen intended that two-thirds of the German army (33½ corps) be deployed in the west, with the bulk of this force being allocated to the right wing. This strong right wing was to advance through neutral Belgium and the Netherlands, into northern France, envelop Paris, and annihilate the French army in the process.[50] Once the French army was destroyed, German could dictate terms to a prostrate France and shift her forces east to deal with any Russian threat.[51]

Schlieffen's planning process, though, indicates that even with the advantages of a superior operational doctrine and the favorable strategic situation of 1905, he had his doubts about the feasibility of the undertaking. Gerhard Ritter's groundbreaking work, The Schlieffen Plan went into great detail about the process that eventually resulted in his final plan. In addition to publishing the final memorandum, Ritter also published the six drafts that Schlieffen wrote before finally finding one with which he was satisfied. These are very revealing, as they show his difficulty in finding a solution to Germany's expected two-front war. They demonstrate that right up to the moment he submitted his memorandum, Schlieffen was undecided as to the best course of the *Aufmarsch*.[52]

In addition to the drafts of his 1905 memorandum, the Schlieffen *Nachlass* from which Ritter worked contains the *Schlussbesprechung* of the last *Kriegsspiel* directed by

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[49] Ritter, Schlieffen Plan, p.22.

[50] Despite the moral indignation with which this move was greeted at the outbreak of the war (and, indeed, by some historians still today), violating Belgian neutrality was seriously considered by the Entente as well. See S.R. Williamson, "Joffre Reshapes French Strategy, 1911-1913," in Paul Kennedy, ed. The War Plans of the Great Powers (London: George Allan & Unwin, 1979) pp. 133-154.

[51] For the completed draft of the plan see Ritter, Schlieffen Plan, pp. 134-148.

[52] Ibid., pp. 148-160.

Schlieffen.[53] This document was not discussed by Ritter, as he dismissed Schlieffen's *Kriegsspiele* and staff rides as unimportant, saying that they were merely, "means of testing individual problems in his tactical-strategic planning."[54] Other authors, however, have offered a more compelling assessment of the worth of Schlieffen's staff rides and war games. Arden Bucholz has demonstrated convincingly that they were used by all levels of the General Staff to test not just individual problems, but entire war plans.[55] This *Kriegsspiel* is of particular importance because it took place in November-December 1905, i.e., just when Schlieffen was drafting his memorandum, indicating that it was used as a test for the concepts he would employ in his final draft.

This *Kriegsspiel* differs significantly from the final memorandum. Rather than take the offensive and invade France through Belgium and the Netherlands, Schlieffen awaited his enemies' blows in both the west and the east. The game began with two Russian units, the Niemen and Narew Armies, invading East Prussia, in a scenario similar to one played in Schlieffen's earlier games and to the one which actually occurred in 1914. Much greater numbers of German troops than were assigned in the Schlieffen Plan were on hand – a total of 13 active corps and 12 reserve divisions with large numbers of Landwehr and cavalry units – to meet this invasion.[56] The result of the game in the east was a German defeat of the Russians by the 35th day of mobilization.[57] These victorious troops were then shifted to the west in time to help parry the French assault.

Significantly, unlike the Schlieffen Plan, the *Kriegsspiel* allowed the French to take the offensive and invade German territory. Schlieffen retained only small forces to guard key points in the west, assigning corps to defend Metz, Strassburg, Saarburg, and the lines of communication between. All told, 10 active corps and 10 reserve divisions were deployed against France.[58] In the game, the German forces detected strong concentrations of French troops near Lille, on the upper Mosel, and in the Vosges. Schlieffen wrote, "it was highly likely that the French intended to march through

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[53] Alfred von Schlieffen, "Schlussbesprechung. Kriegsspiel November-Dezember 1905," USNA, M-961, Roll 3.
[54] Ritter, Schlieffen Plan, p.33.
[55] Arden Bucholz, Moltke, Schlieffen and Prussian War Planning (Providence, RI: Berg, 1991) pp. 158-213, passim. See also Ulrich Liss, "Graf Schlieffen's letztes Kriegsspiel," WWR H.3 Jg.15 (1965) pp. 162-166.
[56] Schlieffen, "Kriegsspiel Nov-Dez 1905," pp. 6-7.
[57] Ibid., p.12.

Belgium along both banks of the Meuse."[59] The French decided to deploy on the Belgian border (here we have echoes of the memorandum to come) because they would have more room in the north to develop their deployment and to avoid the German fortresses and troops along the Rhine. (One reason Schlieffen held back from attacking the French immediately upon the war's outbreak was to allow time for the Belgian and Dutch to declare themselves for one side or the other.) As the French came through Belgium, German troops moved to meet them. Ultimately, the Germans, with Belgian help, surrounded the French forces and annihilated them in a great battle by the 42nd day of mobilization.[60]

Though the above scenario was unlikely, it brings to light several important points and raises some interesting questions. First, it shows even more forcefully than the drafts of the Schlieffen Plan just how far-reaching Schlieffen's ideas were before his final draft and how unsure he was of just how to wage a two-front war successfully. He was willing to entertain the idea of allowing the initiative to pass, at least initially, to his enemies, in part for political reasons, and to allow his enemies the opportunity of invading German territory. It also shows that he was at least somewhat sensitive to political questions. He believed that once Belgium was invaded, the Netherlands would also feel their independence threatened and would feel compelled to enter the war.[61] Schlieffen was obviously not a "military technician, pure and simple," as Ritter believed.[62] His look at the reaction of the Low Countries shows he had an understanding of the political consequences of invading their territory, even if he chose ultimately to ignore it in his quest for a rapid victory.[63]

Despite his views about the importance of the initial plan, Schlieffen's doubts made him clearly willing to abandon it if a more favorable opportunity arose to defeat the French. Schlieffen had played out the possibility of the main French attack falling against

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[58] Ibid., pp. 15-16.
[59] Ibid., p.16.
[60] Ibid., p.34.
[61] Ibid., p.20.
[62] Gerhard Ritter, The Sword and the Scepter: The Problem of Militarism in Germany Vol. II: The European Powers and the Wilhelmine Empire, 1890-1914 (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1972) p.194.
[63] The French of course considered an invasion through Belgium but rejected it on the grounds that it would damage relations with Britain. Williamson, op.cit., pp. 133-154, passim.

Metz and Strassburg in his General Staff ride during the summer of 1905. If this happened, he intended to fight the decisive battle in Lorraine, rather than continue the advance of the right wing.[64] As Ritter has pointed out, the destruction of the French forces was Schlieffen's ultimate goal, not the wheel through Belgium itself.[65]

Moltke the Younger and the Schlieffen Plan

In January 1906, Schlieffen was succeeded by Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, the nephew of the famous victor of the Wars of Unification. From the beginning of his tenure as Chief of the General Staff, Moltke was beset with doubts and fears. First, he doubted his own ability to carry out the tasks of chief of the General Staff. More importantly, he feared that Germany would experience great difficulty winning a future war. He expressed these fears in an audience with the Kaiser in January 1905:

> Wir haben jetzt eine über dreissigjährige Friedensperiode hinter uns und ich glaube, dass wir in unseren Anschauungen vielfach sehr friedensmässig geworden sind. Wie und ob es möglich sein wird, die Massenheere, die wir aufstellen werden, einheitlich zu leisten, kann, glaube ich, kein Mensch vorher wissen. Auch unser Gegner ist ein anderer geworden, wir werden es nicht mehr wir früher mit einem feindlichen Heer, dem wir mit Ueberlegenheit entgegentreten können, zu tun haben, sondern mit einer Nation in Waffen. Es wird ein Volkskrieg werden, der nicht mit einer entscheidenden Schlacht abzumachen sein wird, sondern der ein langes mühevolles Ringen mit einem Lande sein wird, das sich nicht eher überwunden geben wird, als bis seine ganze Volkskraft gebrochen ist, und der auch unser Volk, selbst wenn wir Sieger sein sollten, bis aufs äusserste erschöpfen wird.[66]

Moltke's pessimistic view was later reinforced by German intelligence, who concluded that the French had a clear outline of the German deployment plan. In a *Denkschrift* concerning possible French reactions to the Schlieffen Plan, they concluded that this knowledge could possibly prompt the French army to withdraw into southern

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[64] Friedrich von Boetticher, "Der Lehrmeister des neuzeitlichen Krieges," in [Friedrich] von Cochenhausen, ed., Von Scharnhorst zu Schlieffen, 1806-1906: Hundert Jahre preussisch-deutscher Generalstab (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1933) pp. 310-311.

[65] Ritter, Schlieffen Plan, pp. 55-56. Schlieffen, however, had clearly become obsessed with this idea by the end of his life, and this was reflected in his fanciful 1912 memorandum.

[66] Moltke to his wife, 29 January 1905, in Moltke, Erinnerungen, p.308; For Moltke's fears about the future war see Förster, op.cit., pp. 83-90; and Annika Mombauer, Helmuth von Moltke and the German General Staff – Military and Political Decision-Making in Imperial Germany, 1906-1916 (University of Sussex, DPhil Thesis, 1997) pp.82ff.

France to avoid the German encirclement maneuver. The author of this report was not confident in the plan's chances of success. He wrote:

> Anderseits wird man allerdings in Zukunft auch kaum mit einer solchen völligen Vernichtung der gesamten Feldarmee rechnen können, wie sie 1870 durch die Katastrophen von Metz und Sedan erreicht wurden. Wenn von der heute 6mal so starken Feldarmee (heute 2,000,000 Mann, 1870 – 340,000 Mann) nach anfänglichen Niederlagen starke Teile in den angegebenen Richtungen entkommen, so ist die Fortsetzung der deutschen Operationen keineswegs leicht. Starke Kräfte werden vor den französichen Grenzbefestigungen zurückgelassen werden müssen. Der Vormarsch der deutschen Hauptkräfte gegen die Loire wird von Paris und Lyon her flankiert. Die Riesenfestung Paris wird schwer zu bewältigen sein.[67]

While Schlieffen could rely upon his belief that the superiority of German doctrine was sufficient to allow the army to defeat any enemy in the field, Moltke the Younger could not. It was clear that he believed after 30 years of peace, the German army would have difficulties in combat. Further, he felt that France would not necessarily oblige Germany's plans, and that the next war would drag on for a long time, ending only when one side was exhausted. Yet, he maintained Schlieffen's plan as the basis for his *Aufmarschpläne* right up to 1914, and, in fact, applied Schlieffen's idea more rigidly than Schlieffen himself intended. Why should this have been?

The best possible answer for this lies in Germany's changing strategic situation between 1906 and 1914. The weakness of Russia in the wake of the Russo-Japanese War had given the Schlieffen Plan a window of opportunity for success. However, Russia was able to rebuild her strength more rapidly than believed possible and, in fact, emerged a greater danger than she had been before 1905. The General Staff observed this process with growing alarm.

By 1910, the reform of the Russian army was evident to German observers. In August, Moltke wrote to Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg outlining the

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[67] Grosser Generalstab, May 1910, "Aufmarsch und operative Absichten der Franzosen in einem zukünftigen deutsch-französischen Kriege," BA/MA, PH3/256; Förster, op.cit., p.86. This *Denkschrift* appears to have been a thought-piece on possible French reactions to the Schlieffen Plan. The intelligence assessments of this period indicated that the French intended to deploy the bulk of their army along the border between Rethel and Belfort defensively. See Archivrat Greiner, "Welche Nachrichten besass der deut. GGS über Mobilmachung und Aufmarsch des franz. Heeres in den Jahren 1885-1914," unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/50267.

implications of the on-going Russian reorganization. In addition to raising seven new divisions in European Russia, "a considerable increase in the number of technical units, particularly aircraft and railroad formations, [had] taken place, so that the Russian army [would] soon be better equipped with such formations than the German army." Further, the Russians were changing their deployment plans. Four army corps were pulled back from the border and deployed deeper in Russia, creating a "central army" that could be deployed according to need "in east Asia, on the western border or in the Balkans."[68] Ultimately, this "central army" was to be composed of 7 army corps (15 divisions), a considerable reserve force.[69]

The Russians had also greatly improved the combat capability of their army. In the aftermath of the Russo-Japanese War, they had equipped their army with modern field howitzers, providing their infantry corps with important firepower.[70] Moreover, large numbers of old and unsatisfactory officers were dismissed, and younger more able men were promoted.[71] The army's regulations had also been thoroughly re-written to reflect the lessons of the war and training procedures had been tightened up.[72] While the Germans still reported that Russian tactics and training were below the standards of the German army, they acknowledged the great strides which the Russian army had taken and that it was a much more dangerous foe than had been the case in 1905.[73]

The Russians also introduced reforms into their mobilization procedures, which decreased the time needed to deploy their army. The numbers of active personnel in units was increased and the mobilization procedures for reservists were simplified. Perhaps most importantly, though, in the spring of 1913, the Russians introduced a "war preparation period" [*Kriegsvorbereitungsperiode*]. This allowed for the beginning of the

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[68] Moltke to Bethmann, 5 August 1910, PRO GFM 10/89 (Russland 72geh/15: "Militär und Marine Angelegenheiten Russland, 1 Jan 1907 – ").
[69] Moltke to Bethmann, 14 November 1910, in ibid. See also David Stevenson, The Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904-1914 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996) pp. 149ff.
[70] Helmuth von Moltke, "Die wichtigsten Veränderungen im Heerwesen Russlands im Jahre 1913," 6 March 1914, BA/MA, PH3/657. By the war's outbreak each Russian corps was equipped with a battalion of 12 122mm howitzers. Bruce I. Gudmundsson, On Artillery (Westport, CT: Paeger, 1993) p.32.
[71] Moltke to Bethmann, "Die militär-politische Lage Deutschlands," 2 December 1911, PRO GFM 11/68 (Deutschland 121/secreta: "Die Angelegenheiten der deut.Armee, 1886-1919"), p.11.
[72] Grosser Generalstab, "Die Kriegsbereitschaft Russlands," February 1914, PRO GFM 10/89 (Russland 72geh/15: "Militär und Marine Angelegenheiten Russland, 1 Jan 1907 – ").
[73] Grosser Generalstab, "Mitteilungen über russische Taktik," 27 February 1913, BA/MA, PH3/657.

mobilization process with a secret order in times of international tension, greatly reducing mobilization time.[74]

Further, financed largely through French loans, the Russians were expending great sums of money on improving their railroad capabilities, a process that had grave implications for German security.[75] German intelligence estimated that the great building program, which was to begin in 1912, would result in the laying of over 10,000 kilometers of new track. By 1922, the Russian interior would be linked far better with her borders.[76] This program caused great alarm within the General Staff. Moltke wrote to Bethmann the effects:

> Dies heisst, dass jetzt die russische Armee am 13.Mobilmachungstag mit der Hälfte, am 18.Mobilmachungstag mit zwei Dritteln operationsfähig an der Westgrenze stehen kann, nach Durchführung der Bahnpläne am 13.Mobilmachungstag schon mit zwei Dritteln, am 18.Mobilmachungstag in ihrer Gesamtstärke.
>
> Für die Erreichung der Marschbereitshaft sind hierbei veranschlagt vom Ausspruch der Mobilmachung ab für die Kavalleriedivisionen ½ - 3 Tage, für die aktiven Korps 5 Tage, für die Reserve-divisionen 8 Tage. Beginnt die Mobilmachung, womit gerechnet werden muss, schon vor dem offiziellen Erlass des Mobilmachungsbefehls, so können die Truppen unter Umständen 5 Tage früher in den Aufmarschräumen eintreffen.[77]

Already by 1911, Russian improvements in mobilization procedures meant that her army would complete its deployment to the western border in half the time it had taken in 1906.[78] This railroad program made the situation even more difficult for the Germans.

While in 1911 Moltke could still write that France was Germany's most dangerous enemy,[79] clearly Russia was becoming more and more of a threat. The internal

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[74] Grosser Generalstab, "Die Kriegsbereitschaft Russlands," February 1914, PRO GFM 10/89 (Russland 72geh/15: "Militär und Marine Angelegenheiten Russland, 1 Jan 1907 – "); Gunther Frantz, Russlands Eintritt in den Krieg (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1924) pp. 17-24; Stevenson, op.cit., pp. 153ff.

[75] D.N. Collins, "The Franco-Russian Alliance and Russian Railways, 1891-1914," The Historical Journal Vol.XVI, Nr.4 (1973) pp. 777-788; Stevenson, op.cit., pp. 323ff.

[76] Grosser Generalstab, "Der Ausbau des strategischen Eisenbahnnetzes in Russland," 27 November 1913, PRO, GFM 6/141 (Russland 93/17: "Eisenbahnen in Russland, 1 Jun 1912 – 31 Dez 1914").

[77] Grosser Generalstab, "Der Ausbau des strategischen Bahnnetzes in Russland. Ergänzung und Berichtigung der Ausarbeitung vom 15.Dezember 1913," 7 July 1914, in ibid. Underlining in original.

[78] Moltke to Bethmann, "Die militär-politische Lage Deutschlands," 2 December 1911, PRO GFM 11/68 (Deutschland 121/secreta: "Die Angelegenheiten der deut.Armee, 1886-1919"), p.10.

[79] Ibid., p.6.

improvements of the Russian army made it a dangerous enemy by making it more tactically and strategically flexible. Its defeat in the Russo-Japanese War had prompted an updating of its combat regulations, the dismissal of unsatisfactory officers, the purchase of modern, mobile artillery, resulting in a more tactically capable force. The railroad building plan and improvements in mobilization procedures made the Russian army more strategically flexible. These reforms allowed the Russian army to deploy more men faster than had been the case in Schlieffen's day. These improvements also enabled Russia to form a large "central army" in the heart of Russia and to shift the border forces further back. These changes made the army was less vulnerable to a sudden Austro-German pre-emptive strike and allowed the Russians to have a variety of deployment plans.[80] Needless to say, these were worrying developments for Moltke.

The inability to strike at Russia, as well as the fact that any war against Russia would certainly be long and indecisive, forced Moltke to concentrate on France.[81] Russia's growing strength and speed of mobilization made her a steadily growing threat to Germany and made a rapid victory in the west even more crucial than in Schlieffen's day. Only by coming to a quick reckoning with France could Germany have the forces necessary to deal with the formidable Russian "steamroller."

Needing a rapid victory in the west, Moltke adhered to the basic outline of Schlieffen's 1905 plan. However, his fears caused him to make important alterations to Schlieffen's original concept.[82] First, to protect against an expected French invasion of Alsace/Lorraine, he had deployed eight army corps in the 6th and 7th Armies along the border.[83] Perhaps more importantly, in reaction to his fears about the possibility of having to fight a long war, Moltke had changed the course of the advance of the German right wing. Schlieffen's plan had called for the strong German right wing to outflank the

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[80] See Gunther Frantz, "Russlands Westaufmarsch seit 1880," WuW Jg.1930 pp. 235-255.
[81] In 1913, Moltke abandoned the *Grosser Ostaufmarsch* and concentrated solely on plans for the west. See Mombauer, op.cit., pp. 137-140.
[82] The claim that these changes caused the failure of the German plan in 1914 has been sufficiently refuted by historians. For the most recent and the most comprehensive treatment see Mombauer, op.cit., pp. 80-89.
[83] Erich Ludendorff, Mein militärischer Werdegang (Munich: Ludendorffs Verlag, 1933) pp. 126-129; Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg Bd.I: Die Grenzschlachten im Westen (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1925) pp. 61-63. Although this alteration was criticized after the war for not leaving enough forces on the right wing, given the logistical difficulties of the right wing in 1914, it is doubtful whether the German army would have been able to deploy and supply more units than they actually did in 1914. See Martin van Creveld, Supplying War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977).

French border fortifications by advance through Belgium and the Netherlands. Instead, Moltke decided to limited the German advance to Belgian territory with the desire of keeping the Netherlands as an outlet to the world. In 1911, he wrote:

> A hostile Belgium at our back could have disastrous consequences for the advance of the German army to the west, particularly if England should use the violation of Belgian neutrality as a pretext for entering the war against us. A neutral Holland secures our rear, because if England declares war on us for violating Belgian neutrality she cannot herself violate Dutch neutrality. She cannot break the very law for whose sake she goes to war.
>
> Furthermore it will be very important to have in Holland a country whose neutrality allows us to have imports and supplies. She must be the windpipe that enables us to breathe.[84]

This restriction of the advance to Belgium, however, caused severe constraints on the German deployment, as the right wing could not use the important rail lines of the Dutch Maastricht area. The German 1st and 2nd Armies, in total almost 600,000 troops with attendant supplies, were now forced to pass through a corridor only 12 miles wide.[85] Moltke's alteration made the immediate seizure of the intact Belgian railroads an absolute necessity. To this end, the General Staff devised a plan to take the Belgian fortress of Liège with its crucial rail junction by a *coup de main* at the outbreak of the war. When this plan, judged by Ritter to be "verging on the fantastic,"[86] was originally drawn up in 1908, it was intended to be launched on the 11th Mobilization Day. In the years before the war, however, the launch date was reduced to the 5th Mobilization Day, putting more and more time pressure on the German mobilization plan.[87] Having to take Liège on the fifth day meant that the German forces earmarked for the attack would have to start their advance within hours of the mobilization order being issued.[88] With the details of the plan worked out in such minute detail and with the time pressures imposed

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[84] Moltke, "General Observations on the Schlieffen Plan by H. von Moltke (apparently dates 1911)," printed in Ritter, Schlieffen Plan, p.166

[85] Bucholz, op.cit., p.266.

[86] Ritter, Sword and the Scepter II, p.221.

[87] Gerhard Tappen to Ernst Kabisch, 14 April 1937, BA/MA, Tappen Nachlass, N56/5. Tappen professed to have no knowledge as to why the change in the time frame took place.

[88] Moltke kept the details of the Liège plan secret from everyone outside the army. Bethmann did not find out the details until 31 July. Mombauer, op.cit., p.85; Ritter, Sword and Scepter II, p.267.

by the *coup de main* on Liège, it is no wonder that Moltke blanched at the prospect of having to scrap the entire plan in August 1914.[89]

Recent research has shown clearly that Moltke had grave doubts about Germany's ability to conclude a future war rapidly. This begs the question why did he not scrap the plan and prepare Germany for a long war. An answer to this can be found in the changing strategic situation. While the General Staff may have believed France to be the more dangerous enemy in 1914, Russia was rapidly taking her place. When Russia's railway building and army reform were completed in 1922, she would be a far greater threat to Germany. These reforms would enable Russia to mobilize and deploy a massive army almost as quickly as the Germans could mobilize their army. Convinced that a general European war was inevitable, Moltke pushed for war as soon as possible, believing that once Russian military reforms were completed, Germany's slim prospects of success would diminish even further.[90] However, even with the Russian re-organization incomplete she was still a far more dangerous foe than she had been in 1905. Germany needed to defeat France quickly in order to be able to meet this eastern threat, and only an offensive strategy offered even the slightest prospects of a rapid French collapse. Consequently, in July 1914, Moltke seized upon the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand as the pretext needed to launch Germany's war and set into motion the plan that he hoped, but perhaps did not expect, would bring about France's fall.

Conclusion

Alfred von Schlieffen and Helmuth von Moltke the Younger have been roughly handled by recent historians. Martin Kitchen described Schlieffen as a man obsessed with the "minutiae of military planning," who believed that the "uncertainties of warfare ...

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[89] In August 1914, when it seemed as if France would remain neutral, Moltke was asked by Kaiser Wilhelm to scrap his western deployment and deploy against Russia instead. This caused Moltke great stress and resulted in a minor breakdown. See Mombauer, op.cit., pp. 196-203.

[90] See his statements in the "Kriegsrat" of December 1912, which were recorded by Admiral Georg von Müller in his diary. Quoted in John C.G. Röhl, The Kaiser and His Court: Wilhelm II and the Government of Germany (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) pp. 162-163. Moltke's timing for the war was also influenced by the reorganization of the Belgian army begun with their Army Law of 1913, which would have resulted in a field army of almost 350,000 men. This obviously would have made the advance through Belgium much more difficult and time consuming. See "Denkschriften über England, das engl. Expeditionskorps, Belgien und Italien," August 1911 – April 1914, BA/MA, PH3/528.

could be eliminated as far as possible by careful planning and technical experience."[91] On the other hand, according to one historian, Schlieffen's successor, Moltke the Younger, was "unprepared by education and experience to understand war planning." This meant that he was unable to develop a "clear defense policy during the years 1906-1911."[92] According to recent historians, the shortcomings of these men led both to cling to a strategy that had no hope of success.

This chapter has attempted to show why Schlieffen and Moltke, despite the evidence offered by the historical and theoretical writings of their contemporaries, developed and maintained a war plan that assumed a rapid German victory. It is clear that both men had doubts about the plan's prospects of success. However, they both believed there were sound reasons for not changing the basic structure of their plans.

For Schlieffen, there were several reasons. First, he believed that the German army was operationally more capable than its enemies. The various tactical and strategic debates which had taken place in the army after 1871 had resulted, in his view, in an army that was better able to fight the *Bewegungskrieg* necessary to annihilate its opponent's forces. Second, Schlieffen believed that the Russo-Japanese War had shown that the Russian army, although it might be large, was by no means capable of fighting a modern war. Having never had much respect for the Russians, Schlieffen now believed that their army would not be able to reform itself in the foreseeable future. These conditions suggested to Schlieffen that a short war was indeed a possibility for Germany in 1905. However, a short war would only be possible if they could come to grips with the French army. As the French intended to remain on the defensive, the German army had to take the battle to them. The only way this could be accomplished was by outflanking the fortified Franco-German border.

Moltke the Younger had very different reasons for sticking with a plan that assumed an expeditious German victory. The years after Schlieffen's retirement had seen a significant change in Germany's strategic situation. The Russian army reform, which the former General Staff Chief had believed would not take place, occurred in fact with surprising alacrity. Moreover, not only did the Russians rebuild the strength they had lost

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[91] Kitchen, op.cit, p.170f.
[92] Bucholz, op.cit., p.217, 225.

during the war with Japan, they increased dramatically the capabilities of their army. The German General Staff believed that reforms begun around 1910 would be complete by 1922 at the latest, and would make the Russian army almost invulnerable. With no prospect of being able to fight a short campaign in the east and with the growing threat of the Russian army, Moltke the Younger had no choice but to focus German efforts in the west. To meet the Russian advance that would come in any war, he had to defeat the French forces quickly. This meant that he had to carry out an offensive strategy, regardless of his doubts about the ability of the German army to defeat France quickly. Again, the only way that offered even the faintest prospects of carrying this out was to avoid fighting through the fortified border area, i.e., to outflank the French positions and keep the war in the free field where the Germans would be able to fight the kind of war in which they excelled – *Bewegungskrieg*.

Part Two:
The Great *Volkskrieg*

Introduction

On 1 August 1914, Kaiser Wilhelm II signed the orders beginning German mobilization. With this act, the long-awaited general European war had begun. The Prussian Minister of War, *Generalleutnant* Erich von Falkenhayn, recorded the scene with pride in his diary later that day:

> Um 5 Uhr nachmittags Unterzeichung der Ordre durch Seine Majestät auf dem Tisch, der aus dem Holz der 'Victory' Nelsons geschnitzt ist. Ich sage dabei: 'Gott segne Eure Majestät und Ihre Waffen, Gott schütze das geliebte Vaterland.' Darauf drückt mir der Kaiser lange die Hand, in unserer beider Augen stehen Tränen.[1]

The German army's various strategic debates and internal rivalries were put to the side as the plans prepared in 1905 by Alfred Graf von Schlieffen and modified by his successor, Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, were finally put to the test. The German military swung enthusiastically behind their leadership and advanced happily towards war, confident in a German victory.

These beliefs seemed confirmed by initial events in the west. The German army advanced generally according to plan. The Belgian fortress of Liège fell to a daring *coup de main* only slightly behind schedule. Mobilization of the army went smoothly, and by late-August, the armies of the German right wing were advancing through Belgium on the French border. In the south, Marshal Joseph Joffre's offensive was repulsed with heavy losses by the German 6th and 7th Armies. On 22 August, Moltke ordered these armies to pursue the beaten and retreating French. Moltke's previous doubts were forgotten, as everywhere German arms seemed victorious. The mood at the German headquarters, the *Oberste Heeresleitung* (OHL), was exuberant.

By mid-September, however, German plans lay in tatters. The German right wing had failed to annihilate the French army. In fact, it had been forced to retreat. Though the

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[1] Erich von Falkenhayn, diary entry for 1 August 1914, cited in Hans von Zwehl, Erich von Falkenhayn: Eine biographische Studie (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1926) p.58.

German left wing had succeeded in repulsing Joffre's advance into Lorraine, its subsequent counter-attack faltered against strong French defenses. The war in the east had, at least initially, gone badly with General Maximillian von Prittwitz' defeat at Gumbinnen and his subsequent intention to withdraw behind the Vistula. The German victory at Tannenberg under Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, though spectacular, only postponed the inevitable advance of the Russian steamroller and did little to help their Austro-Hungarian ally. German strategy had failed. The French were not defeated quickly and forces were not available for the east. Germany now faced the much-feared two-front war. Moreover, though in mid-September the German command did not yet realize it, their doctrine of a war of movement (*Bewegungskrieg*) had also failed.

The German assumptions about war examined in Chapter 3 had been largely proved wrong by events in late 1914. The war was not brought swiftly to a conclusion by an annihilation of the French army in the west. There, the front had become static, with both sides facing each other in primitive field fortifications and with neither side strong enough to break through and defeat the other. *Stellungskrieg* had replaced *Bewegungskrieg*. The task of finding a solution to this largely unexpected and challenging strategic and doctrinal problem fell to Erich von Falkenhayn, who had replaced Moltke the Younger on 14 September.

This section will focus on Falkenhayn's attempts to solve these problems from the time of his taking over from Moltke to the end of 1915. First, it will look at the steps the new General Staff Chief instituted to put the unsuccessful German plan back on track and the radical conclusions Falkenhayn reached after all attempts to win the war in the west in 1914 failed (Chapter 4). Then, the impact of the lessons drawn from Austro-German offensive in the east during the summer of 1915 on General Staff Chief's strategy will be examine (Chapter 5). And finally, the lessons of war in the west during 1915 will be analyzed (Chapter 6). From this will emerge a picture of the development of Falkenhayn's strategic thought from the war's beginning to the end of 1915.

commanders within the first weeks of the war to carry out their own strategic schemes that sometimes ran counter to the OHL's directions.[13]

Most pernicious for Moltke, however, were the Military Cabinet and the Ministry of War. The head of the Military Cabinet, *Generaloberst* Moriz von Lyncker, and the Prussian Minister of War, Erich von Falkenhayn, were close advisors of the Kaiser. Both accompanied the Imperial headquarters into the field in 1914 and were in a position to influence events. In Falkenhayn, Moltke found someone within the headquarters willing to criticise his strategic decisions vocally and prominently.[14] In Lyncker, Moltke found someone willing to listen to Falkenhayn's criticisms.[15] When Moltke's strategy seemed to be going badly, each of these individuals was in a position to make important changes. The result was Moltke's dismissal and Falkenhayn's promotion.[16]

The New Chief of the General Staff

Like Helmuth von Moltke the Younger, Erich von Falkenhayn's reputation suffered the severe criticisms of his contemporaries after the war. From this criticism emerges the picture of a hesitant, weak leader, who lacked the strength of will necessary to take difficult decisions. Max Bauer, who served in the OHL through Falkenhayn's tenure and who recognized some of Falkenhayn's better qualities, nevertheless judged him unfit for high command. After the war, he wrote:

> Falkenhayn hatte grosse Vorzüge. Seine Arbeitskraft war unbegrenzt. Er faßte leicht, begriff rasch, hatte ein gutes Gedächtnis und entschied sich schnell. Aber, sei es weil ihm die sichere Grundlage fehlte, sei es weil ihm die Intuitivität des Feldherrn mangelte, es waren oft halbe Entschlüsse, und auch in diesen schwankte er. Im übrigen war er sehr gewandt und verstand die Menschen zu nehmen und auszunutzen, ohne dass sie es merkten....Alles in allem war er eine ungewöhnliche Natur, die sicher einen glänzenden Staatsmann, Diplomaten oder Parlamentarier abgegeben hätte, der Feldherr lag ihm am wenigsten.[17]

Rupprecht, see Frederick Campbell, The Bavarian Army, 1870-1918: The Constitutional and Structural Relations with the Prussian Military Establishment (Ohio State University, PhD Thesis, 1972) pp. 226-240.

[13] See Mombauer, op.cit., pp. 223-225; Holger Herwig, The First World War, (London: Arnold, 1997) pp. 99-101.

[14] See the diary and reports of the Bavarian military plenipotentiary in the OHL, Karl Ritter von Wenninger, printed in Bernd F. Schulte, "Neue Dokumente zu Kriegsausbruch und Kriegsverlauf 1914," MGM 1/79, pp. 123-185.

[15] Groener wrote, "nach der Uebersiedlung nach Luxemburg bildeten sich zwei feindliche Lager im Kölner Hof der Generalstab, im Hotel Brasseur Militärkabinett und Kriegsministerium." Paper presented to the Mittwochsgesellschaft, 11 January 1933 in USNA, Groener Papers (Microfilm Publication M-137), Roll 13.

[16] For accounts of this process, see Afflerbach, Falkenhayn, pp. 179-189; and Mombauer, op.cit., pp. 232-236.

[17] Max Bauer, Der grosse Krieg in Feld und Heimat (Tübingen: Osiander'sche Buchhandlung, 1921) p.58.

existed as autonomous institutions during peacetime. As Section One has shown, this allowed many competing views of warfare and doctrine to develop before the outbreak of World War I and allowed independently thinking officers a voice. However, it also meant that the German army entered World War I with a command structure which was open to challenge from within.

The outbreak of war was meant to simplify the German command structure. With the declaration of war, Kaiser Wilhelm II assumed command of the various contingents (i.e., the Bavarian, Württemberg, and Saxon armies) of the Imperial army as the "*Oberster Kriegsherr*"(Supreme Warlord) under Article 63 of the German Constitution. Wilhelm was to be advised by the Chief of the Prussian General Staff, in August 1914 Helmuth von Moltke, who became the "Chief of Staff of the Field Army." In reality, the Emperor abdicated his command functions to the Chief of the General Staff, who issued orders under Wilhelm's name often without prior consultation. Thus, the Chief of the General Staff became the de facto director of Germany's war, able to issue orders with Imperial approval over a wide area. Armed with this authority, the General Staff was able to move into areas which had previously been the remit of other organizations.[11]

It would be a mistake, though, to see the General Staff as an all-powerful organization, especially at the beginning of the war. Several competing organizations still wielded considerable power and many of the army's commanders held considerable personal authority. At the war's outbreak, the German army's 25 army corps and 14 reserve corps formed 8 armies, with 7 deployed in the west and 1 in the east. The commanders of these armies were drawn from the high-ranking nobility and from high-ranking officers who had often held important posts in the pre-war army. Thus, three army commanders were members of the high nobility (Crown Princes Wilhelm and Rupprecht and Albrecht Duke of Württemberg) and two had served previously as Prussian Minister of War (Josias von Heeringen and Karl von Einem). The very real personal authority of these army commanders was further strengthened by the tradition of *Auftragstaktik* within the German army,[12] a tradition which was often invoked by army

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[11] See Friedrich Hossbach, Die Entwicklung des Oberbefehls über das Heer in Brandenburg, Preussen und im Deutschen Reich von 1655-1945 (Würzburg: Holzner-Verlag, 1957) pp. 56-71; and Holger Afflerbach, "Wilhelm as Supreme Warlord in the First World War," War in History 5 (4) (1998) pp. 427-449.

[12] See Martin Samuels, "Directive Command and the German General Staff," War in History 2/1 (1995) pp. 22-40. The position of Wilhelm and Rupprecht as crown princes of Germany and Bavaria, respectively, allowed them to play a political role. Wilhelm, in particular, was kept unusually well informed about events. See the diary of Major von Redern, the Ia of the *Operationsabteilung*, BA/MA, W10/50676. On

Chapter 4:
The Rise of *Stellungskrieg*

On 1 August 1914, Kaiser Wilhelm II signed the order mobilizing the German army. After years of intense preparation, the German army was finally going to war. German military leaders believed their army would never be better prepared. At the beginning of the crisis in early July, the Prussian Minister of War, *Generalleutnant* Erich von Falkenhayn, had assured the Kaiser that the German army was fully prepared for conflict,[1] while the Chief of the General Staff, *Generaloberst* Helmuth von Moltke, stressed that the timing would never be better.[2] After 40 years of theorizing about war, the time had come to put German military ideas to the test; with great anticipation, the German military theorists laid down their pens and took up their swords.

The Kaiser's order set in motion the detailed workings of the Schlieffen/Moltke Plan. A series of long-prepared and meticulously planned events began: The Kaiser's mobilization order arrived at the Ministry of War at 5:20pm, only 20 minutes after it had been signed. By 5:25, the necessary telegrams were already being dispatched.[3] The next several weeks were spent in a state of organized confusion, as officers and men reported to their wartime posts and units assembled for the advance into France, all according to the detailed plans drawn up before the war. Over 11,000 trains carried the army to the offensive. Between 2 and 18 August, 2,150 trains (one every 10 minutes) crossed the Hohenzollern Bridge in Cologne. In all, the Germans assembled and deployed close to 4 million men and over 850,000 horses. The years of preparation seemed to pay off, as the

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[1] Erich von Falkenhayn to the *Parlamentarischer Untersuchungsausschuß* (the Reichstag commission investigating Germany's failure in the war) quoted in Erwin Hölzle, ed. Quellen zur Entstehung des Ersten Weltkrieges: Internationale Dokumente, 1901-1914 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978) document 131, p.308; For Falkenhayn's role during the outbreak of war see, Holger Afflerbach, Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1996) pp. 147-171.

[2] For Moltke's role in the July Crisis and during the outbreak of war, see Annika Mombauer, Helmuth von Moltke and the German General Staff: Military and Political Decision-Making in Imperial Germany, 1906-1916 (University of Sussex, DPhil Thesis, 1997) pp. 167-203.

[3] Ernst von Wrisberg, Heer und Heimat 1914-1918 (Leipzig: KF Koehler, 1921) p.4. A state of "*drohende Kriegsgefahr*" (imminent threat of war) had been declared on 31 July. The German ultimatum to Russia expired at 4:00pm on 1 August and the Kaiser signed the mobilization order at 5:00pm.

mobilization proceeded like clockwork. A fortnight after the mobilization order was issued, the *Westheer* was declared "*operationsbereit*."[4]

The first few days after mobilization also saw the war's first encounters as German troops entered Luxemburg and Belgium. On 3 August, Luxemburg fell without resistance.[5] Belgium, though, offered more difficulty. The taking of the fortress of Liège, with its rail network so crucial to the German deployment, took longer than planned. However, the fortress was eventually neutralized sufficiently to allow the troops of the German right wing to pass, creating just a small bump in the road for the advancing Germans.[6] By 20 August, the powerful German right wing stood ready to advance into France and crush the French army in a swift, decisive campaign.

At first, the plan created by Schlieffen and modified by Moltke seemed to be succeeding. The powerful German thrust through Belgium aimed at the French left wing took the French command by surprise. Committed to their own offensive in Alsace-Lorraine, they possessed few reserves readily available for deployment against the German right, and the German armies advanced deep into France pursuing the weak French left wing and with it the recently landed British Expeditionary Force. The pre-war emphasis on *Bewegungskrieg*, with its fluid battles and grand envelopments seemed to pay off. The German command was overjoyed and convinced of their impending victory against the French. The Imperial headquarters celebrated victory after victory and daily anticipated another Sedan.[7]

However, in a story well told, the German advance was brought to a halt on the Marne River in a series of battles lasting from 5 to 9 September, and the German right wing was forced to retreat by re-deployed French forces and the BEF. With this retreat came the end of the Schlieffen/Moltke Plan and also the end of Helmuth von Moltke's career as the strategic head of the German army. In the sarcastic words of the Prussian Minister of War, "Schlieffen's notes [had] come to an end, and with this, Moltke's

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[4] Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg Bd I: Die Grenzschlachten im Westen (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1925) pp. 128-154; Hermann von Staabs, Aufmarsch nach zwei Fronten: Auf Grund der Operationspläne von 1871-1914 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1925) pp. 41-42. The *Ostheer* had been declared "*operationsbereit*" 3 days earlier.
[5] Der Weltkrieg I, pp. 106-108.
[6] Ibid., pp. 108-120.
[7] This feeling of impending victory was particularly strong amongst the Kaiser's entourage, while the professional military were a bit more guarded in their optimism. See the diaries of the head of the Kaiser's headquarters, Plessen, and those of the head of his Naval Cabinet, Müller. Hans von Plessen, "Tagebuch," 24 August - 7 September 1914, BA/MA, W10/51063 and Admiral Georg Müller's diary entries reprinted in The Kaiser and His Court: The First World War Diaries of Admiral Georg von Müller (ed. Walter Görlitz) (trans. Mervyn Savill) (London: MacDonald, 1961) pp. 25-28.

wits."[8] On 14 September, Falkenhayn took up the reins of Germany's strategic direction from the shattered Moltke. Thus, to Falkenhayn fell the task of taking the German army into poorly charted and largely unknown territory – *Stellungskrieg* and *Ermattungsstrategie*.

The German Army at War

Although the German army went to war in August 1914 with a high reputation, it had not fought a war in over 40 years. The army's reputation stemmed initially from its successes in the Wars of Unification and was sustained by its peacetime emphasis on professional excellence. Probably no other army dedicated as much time to the training and the development of its officers. This emphasis was reflected in the myriad of professional journals, societies, and schools that developed after 1870. This emphasis was also reflected in the debates over tactics and strategy which developed in the years before World War I. The professionalism of the German officer corps would be a crucial element in their reaction to the changes in warfare which manifested themselves in 1914. The intellectual openness of the officer corps allowed for a relatively rapid response to the tactical and technical problems of *Stellungskrieg*. However, before this could occur, one of the elements which fostered this climate of intellectual flexibility in the peacetime German army created difficulties for the smooth wartime operation of the army.

The Wilhelmine German army could best be characterized during peacetime as a "polycracy," with many different centers of authority competing with one another for power.[9] The corps commanders, the Ministry of War, the Military Cabinet, and the General Staff all possessed important, often overlapping, powers during peacetime, but none had clear authority over the others.[10] Additionally, the "*Kaiserheer*" was in fact made up of several armies, as the armies of Bavaria, Württemberg, and Saxony all

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[8] Quoted in Hans von Zwehl, Erich von Falkenhayn: Eine biographische Studie (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1926) p.66.

[9] I borrow this term from Hans-Ulrich Wehler, who used the phrase "*authoritäre Polykratie*" to describe the structure of Wilhelmine government. Das Deutsche Kaiserreich (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1973) pp. 69-77.

[10] On the tensions between the various higher authorities within the army see "Die Entwicklung des Verhältnisses zwischen Generalstab und Kriegsministerium," unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/50211; Heinrich Otto Meisner, Der Kriegsminister 1814-1914 (Berlin: Hermann Reinshagen Verlag, 1940); Rudolf Schmidt-Bückeburg, Das Militärkabinett der preussischen Könige und deutschen Kaiser: Seine geschichtliche Entwicklung und staatsrechtliche Stellung, 1787-1918 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1933). On the role of corps commanders, especially in training [*Ausbildung*], see Paul Schneider, Organisation des Heeres (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1931) pp. 13-27.

Another of his staff, Wilhelm Groener, came to a similar conclusion. He wrote that Falkenhayn was "lacking in confidence, vacillating, and easily influenced by others."[18] Others saw Falkenhayn as pessimistic and, hence, not dedicated to winning the war.[19]

Indeed, Falkenhayn's appointment to Chief of the General Staff came as a surprise to his contemporaries.[20] At 53, he was younger than the army's corps and army commanders, and his experience in the *Grosser Generalstab* was very limited.[21] Falkenhayn, however, had been tipped as early as 10 August as a possible replacement for Moltke by the Chief of the Military Cabinet, and it was Lyncker and his deputy, *Oberst* Ulrich Freiherr von Marschall, who were instrumental in convincing the Kaiser to call Falkenhayn to the post.[22] Additionally, Falkenhayn was trusted enough by the Kaiser and his Military Cabinet to retain his position as Minister of War when he took up the post of Chief of the General Staff, an important consolidation of two powerful offices.[23]

Falkenhayn had certainly not followed an "ordinary" career for a German officer. After attending cadet school, he was commissioned in the Oldenburg Infantry Regiment Nr.91 in 1880. Though he graduated from the Kriegsakademie near the top of his class, Falkenhayn spent only 3 years (1893-1896) in the *Grosser Generalstab* in Berlin. In 1896, he left Prussian service for China, where he remained for 6 years, working first as an instructor for the Chinese army, then on the staff of the German expeditionary force during the Boxer Rebellion, and finally as a representative of the German government after the Rebellion. Upon his return to Germany in 1903, Falkenhayn resumed a fairly typical career for a German officer; he served as a battalion commander, as a regimental commander, and held various posts in the *Truppengeneralstab*.[24]

However, due to his time spent in China and his limited experience in the *Grosser Generalstab*, many officers saw Falkenhayn as an outsider and charged that he

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[18] Wilhelm Groener, "Die Strategie Falkenhayns. Herbst 1914," Paper presented to the Mittwochsgesellschaft, 29 May 1935, in USNA, Groener Papers, M-137, Roll 13.
[19] Plessen characterized Falkenhayn as a "*schrecklicher Schwarzseher*." Plessen, "Tagebuch," 25 September 1914.
[20] For examples see Gerhard Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 15 September 1914, BA/MA, NL Tappen, N56/1; and August von Cramon, Unser österreichisch-ungarischer Bundesgenosse im Weltkriege (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1920) p.76.
[21] Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg Bd.V: Der Herbst-Feldzug 1914 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1929) p.8.
[22] Erich von Falkenhayn, diary entry for 10 August 1914, quoted in Zwehl, op.cit., p.61; Wilhelm Solger, "General von Falkenhayn als Chef des Generalstabes des deutschen Feldheeres," unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/50709, p.2.
[23] From the very beginning this was looked upon unfavorably by some in the army. See Plessen, "Tagebuch," 15 September 1914.

did not belong to the so-called "Schlieffen School." Indeed, in December 1914 this fact was used against Falkenhayn in an attempt to have him removed from the post of Chief of the General Staff. Major Hans von Haeften, then adjutant to Moltke and later the president of the Reichsarchiv, said in a discussion with the Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, that Falkenhayn lacked training in the "Schlieffen tradition" because he "had only served in the General Staff under Schlieffen for a short period." Haeften maintained that because of this failing, Falkenhayn did not have the trust of the army.[25] These criticisms were taken up after the war by historians. Wolfgang Foerster wrote that Falkenhayn "did not belong to the close circle of General Staff officers who surrounded Graf Schlieffen and upon whom he relied for support."[26]

Despite later criticisms, Falkenhayn's time in China was to prove crucial to his career. In China, he came to attention of Kaiser Wilhelm II and Heinrich, Prince of Prussia. In 1913, due in large part to Imperial favor, Falkenhayn was suddenly thrust into the top echelons of the army. The Kaiser, in a move which caused considerable consternation in the army, named him to replace Josias von Heeringen as Prussian Minister of War. The hitherto obscure 52-year-old *Generalmajor* was to replace the longest serving general in the army. Not since Albrecht von Roon in 1859 had a *Generalmajor* been appointed to such a senior position. Accordingly, Falkenhayn was simultaneously advanced from *Generalmajor* to *Generalleutnant*, jumping over the heads of around 30 more senior *Generalmajore* – a move which created a further stir.[27]

As Minister of War, Falkenhayn played a prominent role in the July Crisis, urging the Kaiser towards war at every opportunity, and, as Minister of War, he took to the field at the war's outbreak as a member of the Imperial headquarters.[28] However, his presence in the headquarters was unwelcomed by some. Perhaps because Falkenhayn was seen as a threat to Moltke, many General Staff officers expressed the opinion that the Minister of

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[24] These biographical details are drawn from Afflerbach's recent work, Falkenhayn, pp. 9-190.
[25] Quoted in Ekkehart P. Guth, "Der Gegensatz zwischen dem Oberbefehlshaber Ost und dem Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres 1914/15: Die Rolle des Majors v. Haeften im Spannungsfeld zwischen Hindenburg, Ludendorff und Falkenhayn," MGM 1/84 p.90.
[26] Wolfgang Foerster, Graf Schlieffen und der Weltkrieg (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1925) p.86. For similar comments, see Solger, "Falkenhayn," p.2.
[27] Falkenhayn was, however, promoted initially "*ohne Patent*," meaning his rank did not advance him in seniority. Only on 27 January 1914 was he given his *Patent*. See Falkenhayn's "Personal-Bogen," in USNA, M-137, Roll 13.
[28] A copy of a portion of Falkenhayn's diary from the July Crisis has recently reappeared in the material returned to Germany from the former Soviet Union. The entries, from 27 July to 4 August 1914, show

War's place during wartime was in Berlin where administrative matters could be dealt with, not in the field. Consequently, Falkenhayn was not kept officially informed about the course of operations and played no role in the operational decisionmaking prior to his appointment as Chief of the General Staff.[29]

Though he had not been kept in close touch with the army's operations, Falkenhayn was able to remain in unofficial contact with the front. Through these contacts, he developed an unfavorable impression of Moltke's handling of the war. Thus, he came to the General Staff determined to correct the wrongs he saw in Moltke's leadership. First and foremost, this meant to Falkenhayn a firmer control over the war's operations.[30] To this end, the new General Staff Chief immediately moved the OHL from Luxemburg to Charleville-Mézières to be closer to the front-line formations. From there, Falkenhayn intended to exercise stricter control over the army's tactical formations.[31]

Indeed, Falkenhayn was in a better position than Moltke to impose his will over the army. As both Chief of the General Staff and Minister of War, he brought two competing organizations, a significant portion of the army's bureaucracy, under a unified command. For the first time in many years, army planning and administration were under the control of one man. Hans von Zwehl, who as Falkenhayn's authorized biographer had access to his now-missing personal papers, wrote that even before the war, Falkenhayn had harboured the desire of reunifying the General Staff with the Ministry of War.[32] Now, in September 1914, he seemed to have achieved his goal. Falkenhayn believed that by retaining both positions, he could better the relationship between the two organizations and effect a more efficient running of the war.[33] In addition to Falkenhayn's control over the army bureaucracy, his good relationship with the Military Cabinet, and indeed with

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clearly Falkenhayn's desire for war in July 1914. BA/MA, W10/50635. See also Afflerbach, Falkenhayn, p.148ff.

[29] On the policy to keep Falkenhayn out of the decisionmaking process, see Hermann Ritter Mertz von Quirnheim to Reichsarchiv, 4 January 1934, BA/MA, W10/51523.

[30] Falkenhayn was not alone in his criticism of Moltke's command style. On 4 September 1914, Wenninger reported to Munich that many were fed up with Moltke's "laissez-faire" leadership. Schulte, op.cit., p.166.

[31] Erich von Falkenhayn, General Headquarters and Its Critical Decisions, 1914-1918 (London: Hutchinson, 1919) p.10; Redern, "Tagebuch," 25 September 1914.

[32] Zwehl, op.cit., pp. 53-54. Indeed, Falkenhayn is reported to have said in October 1914 that one of the war's lessons was that the General Staff should be subordinated to the Ministry of War. Wrisberg, op.cit., p.21.

[33] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.2. The OHL's *Bürooffizier*, Friedrich Mewes, noticed a significant improvement in the relations between the General Staff and the Ministry of War, especially between Tappen and Wrisberg. Mewes to Reichsarchiv, 7 December 1920, BA/MA, W10/51063.

the Kaiser himself, ensured that there would be little meddling from above in his direction of operations.[34]

The Second OHL

Interestingly, Falkenhayn made few major personnel changes when he took over Moltke's position. Although Hermann von Stein, the *Generalquartiermeister*, was removed from the OHL and given a corps command, most of Moltke's original staff remained.[35] The operations officer, *Oberst* Gerhard Tappen, remained at his post, as did the other important *Abteilungchefs*. Falkenhayn, however, entered his position determined to impose his command over the somewhat self-willed staff. Even Falkenhayn's critics credit him for his energy in re-invigorating the OHL following the Marne crisis.[36] One observer wrote, "we all lost our heads a bit – with one exception – Falkenhayn. A practical man, a Gneisenau, who leads us from retreat to victory!"[37]

Although Falkenhayn did not make many personnel changes when he took over as Chief of the General Staff, the day to day running of the OHL changed considerably. Falkenhayn entered into the position determined to take all important decisions personally, later writing that from the day he was named Chief of the General Staff until his resignation in 1916, he "assumed sole responsibility for Germany's conduct of the war."[38] Unlike Moltke, Falkenhayn was resolved not to delegate his authority unduly, and accordingly he broke up the clique of staff officers who exercised considerable power under his predecessor.[39] Under Falkenhayn, the staff officers of the OHL would assume the role of advisors rather than decisionmakers. Although he developed a small circle of advisors, the new General Staff Chief never took them completely into his confidence.

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[34] Groener called Falkenhayn the "*ausgesprochene Günstling des Militärkabinetts*." Groener, "Die Strategie Falkenhayns," p.4. For his relationship with the Kaiser, see Afflerbach, "Wilhelm as Supreme Warlord," pp. 433-443, passim.

[35] Stein was replaced by *Generalmajor* von Voigts-Rhetz, who died of a heart-attack shortly after assuming the position. Voigts-Rhetz was replaced by *Generalmajor* Adolph Wild von Hohenborn. (See below.)

[36] Der Weltkrieg V, pp. 8-9; Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, Betrachtungen zum Weltkriege Vol.2 (Berlin: Reimar Hobbing, 1921) p.44.

[37] Wenninger to his wife, 10 October 1914, in Schulte, op.cit., p.177.

[38] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.1.

[39] After the war, it was claimed a type of camarilla had developed in the OHL under Moltke, composed of the heads of the *Operations-*, *Nachrichten-*, *Politischen-*, and *Centralabteilungen* (Tappen, Hentsch, Dommes, and Fabeck). Mewes to Reichsarchiv, 7 December 1920, BA/MA, W10/51063. See also Wilhelm Groener, Lebenserinnerungen (ed. Friedrich Frhr. Hiller von Gaertringen) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957), p.188; Wenninger, "Tagebuch," 14/15 September 1914, in Schulte, op.cit., p.174.

His distance from even his closest staff earned him the sobriquet, "*der einsame Feldherr*."[40]

Over time, a circle of advisors developed within the new General Staff Chief's staff, with whom he debated, often quite vehemently, different courses of action. Although the composition of this group changed from time to time, several officers remained close to Falkenhayn throughout his tenure. The first of this group was the OHL's operations officer, Gerhard Tappen. Almost universally disliked,[41] Tappen was once described condescendingly by Falkenhayn as his "registrar."[42] Despite this remark, as Tappen's diary shows, he functioned as a sounding board for Falkenhayn's ideas through the war and on occasion exercised considerable influence over the General Staff Chief.

Falkenhayn would often discuss events with his operations officer, and the two would often disagree violently as to the proper course of action. Tappen later described these exchanges:

> Die Ansichten des Gens. v.Falkenhayn waren ja oft nicht leicht zu erraten. Er warf manchmal eine Gedanken hin, der vielleicht gar nicht seiner Ansicht entsprach, nur um meinen Widerspruch hervorzurufen. Wenn es dann manchmal zu recht gereizten und unerquicklichen Auseinandersetzungen gekommen war, sagte er schliesslich, wenn ich meinen Standpunkt sehr scharf betont hatte, das es sei ja auch seine Ansicht. Ich habe dabei oft das Gefühl gehabt, dass es zu einem völligen Bruch zwischen uns kommen müsse.[43]

This tension led on at least one occasion to Tappen proffering his resignation.[44]

The second figure in Falkenhayn's inner core of advisors was an old friend, *Generalmajor* Adolph Wild von Hohenborn.[45] In November 1914, Wild was assigned to

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[40] Hermann Ziese-Beringer, Der einsame Feldherr: Die Wahrheit über Verdun 2 Vols. (Berlin: Frundsberg-Verlag, 1933).

[41] Max Bauer described Tappen to his wife: "Wir hassen ... [ihn] alle von ganzer Seele. Er besitzt alle schlechten Eigenschaften, Egoismus, Arroganz, Unaufrichtigkeit, Unkenntnis und Dummheit in der Potenz." Bauer to his wife, 17 November 1915, quoted in Adolf Vogt, Oberst Max Bauer: Generalstabsoffizier im Zwielicht 1869-1929 (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1974) p.595. For other examples see Fritz von Loßberg, Meine Tätigkeit im Weltkrieg 1914-1918 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1939) pp. 127-128; Rauch to his wife, 11 January 1915, BA/MA, W10/51305.

[42] Falkenhayn once remarked to Groener, "...in operativen Dingen hat Tappen gar keinen Einfluss auf mich. Aber er ist für mich ein vortrefflicher Registrator." Groener, Lebenserinnerungen, p.188. See also Afflerbach, op.cit., p.232.

[43] Gerhard Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/50661, pp. 92-93.

[44] Ibid., p.165. Following a particularly violent argument concerning the attack on Verdun, Falkenhayn told Tappen, "I will not have a second Chief next to me."

[45] Plessen, no fan of Falkenhayn's, was opposed to Wild being named *Generalquartiermeister* because of his closeness with Falkenhayn. Plessen, "Tagebuch," 10 November 1914.

the OHL to replace the recently deceased Voigts-Rhetz as *Generalquartiermeister*. Although the traditional role of a *Generalquartiermeister* was see to the smooth operation of the lines of communication, Wild wrote to his wife about the different nature of his appointment: "...Falkenhayn ... said to me that he needs someone who can advise and support him, be his second conscience, someone who can help him bear the responsibility."[46] Wild functioned in this role as an "*unverantwortliche Ratgeber*" throughout Falkenhayn's time as Chief of the General Staff, even after he left the OHL. Falkenhayn's continued trust in Wild was shown when he named Wild to take over as Minister of War in January 1915 after intrigues had forced Falkenhayn to give up his position of Minister of War.[47]

Wild's successor as *Generalquartiermeister*, *Generalleutnant* Hugo Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven, was the last of Falkenhayn's inner circle. Freytag, who before and after the war distinguished himself as a military writer, often discussed operations with Falkenhayn and participated in the OHL's evening "*Flüsterklub*," at which recent events were discussed.[48] Despite their frequent discussions, however, Freytag ultimately concluded that his influence over Falkenhayn was limited. After the war he wrote, "the final decisions were always [Falkenhayn's] exclusive property...Basically he lacked a truly trusted helper with whom he could have talked everything over."[49]

Outside of these three advisors, the other members of the OHL functioned largely as specialists within their areas of responsibility. Their influence over operational decisions varied, but was usually quite limited. *Oberst* Wilhelm Groener, as the head of the railway section, played an important role in planning and as such was never far from the decisionmaking center. Others played important roles in assessing the lessons of *Stellungskrieg*. *Oberst* Max Bauer was responsible for "heavy artillery." Together with *Oberst* Fritz von Loßberg,[50] who functioned as the operations officer on the Western Front when the OHL moved to the east in spring 1915, and with *Hauptmann* Christian

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[46] Wild to his wife, 10 November 1914, BA/MA, NL Wild, N44/3.
[47] "...the personality of the new Minister of War, Lieut.-General Wild von Hohenborn, guaranteed the maintenance of [the co-operation between the General Staff and the Ministry of War]." Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.3. Wild's close relationship with Lyncker must also have helped maintain smooth relations between the higher authorities of the army. See Wild to his wife, 11 November 1914, BA/MA, N44/3.
[48] Hugo Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven, Menschen und Dinge, wie ich sie in meinem Leben sah (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1923) pp. 269-270.
[49] Ibid., p.269.
[50] Loßberg was described as a "creature of Falkenhayn's" (!) by a disgruntled Max Hoffman, War Diaries and Other Papers (Vol.1) (trans. Eric Sutton) (London: Martin Secker, 1929) p.88.

Harbou, Bauer updated the army's regulations during the summer of 1915 taking into account the lessons of the war to that date.[51]

Falkenhayn's First Strategic Decisions

The German defeat at the Battle of the Marne marked the failure of German plans and left the army in a precarious position. Before being replaced as Chief of the General Staff, Moltke had ordered a general retreat. The armies of the right wing (1st and 2nd) withdrew to the Aisne River, while the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Armies were withdrawn to a line running from Reims to north of Verdun.[52] Moltke also ordered that the 6th and 7th Armies end their attempts to break through the French position to the south and set up defensive positions. Keeping with pre-war ideas, this retreat was to be a purely tactical measure, designed to buy time to bring up sufficient forces to renew the offensive on the right wing. To this end, Moltke initially ordered the 7th Army to the extreme right flank of the army. Pressure from Entente forces, however, forced him to deploy the 7th Army to fill the hole which had arisen between the retreating 1st and 2nd Armies.

When Falkenhayn replaced Moltke on 14 September, this strategic re-deployment had been largely completed. The 1st Army stood on the Aisne River with its right flank on the Oise. The 7th Army had been brought up from Alsace to fill the gap between the 1st and the 2nd Armies and it too stood on the Aisne. The 2nd Army's right flank connected with the 7th north of Reims and the 3rd, 4th, and 5th Armies held a line running from Prosnes east to Verdun. Each army had established field positions and seemed in a good position to repel any frontal attacks from the enemy. The real weakness to the German army came from the extreme right wing. There, 1st Army's right flank was left hanging unprotected, vulnerable to an envelopment by French forces being shifted from the south.[53]

The new German command needed to come up with an alternative plan of operation to restart the stalled offensive and defeat the French before the situation in the east became unmanageable. Groener believed that the German high command had the following options in mid-September 1914:

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[51] Bauer, op.cit., p.86; Martin Samuels, Command or Control? Command, Training and Tactics in the British and German Armies, 1888-1918 (London: Frank Cass, 1995) pp. 158-170. (See Chapter 6.)
[52] Throughout this chapter, please refer to Map 2 located at the end of this work.
[53] Der Weltkrieg V, pp. 17-20.

1. To try once again to throw back the French through an immediate frontal "mass attack" [*Massenangriff*] before the French could effect an envelopment of our right wing.
2. To go on the defensive behind the Aisne and to secure the right wing with large numbers of reserves.
3. To continue the retreat and thereby effect a complete re-grouping of the German forces [*Streitkräfte*] in order to undertake a new operation against the left flank of the French army.[54]

The new Chief of the General Staff believed that a speedy decision could still be reached on the Western Front,[55] and during the night of 14/15 September, he drew up a new plan of operation, choosing Groener's third option. Falkenhayn resolved to carry out an "eccentric" withdrawal to protect the vulnerable right flank and buy further time for a strategic regrouping. He intended to order the 1st Army to "break off from the enemy and to establish ...the line Artems-La Fere-Nouvion Catillon." Falkenhayn intended with this manoeuvre to secure his right flank from French envelopment, await the arrival of the 6th Army, which was in transit from Lorraine, and to buy time to regroup the German forces for another assault on the French left wing. This renewed offensive would begin on 18 September with the 5th Army and would proceed "in echelon" over the next few days, culminating in the 6th Army's envelopment of the French forces from the extreme right wing. [56]

Falkenhayn was dissuaded, however, from this plan by Tappen, who returned from a tour of the front on 15 September. Tappen put forward a number of arguments to convince Falkenhayn not to institute his initial intentions. First, he believed the French to be exhausted [*erschöpft*] and argued that only one final push was needed to decide the campaign. Further, Tappen argued that German morale was already shaken by the withdrawal after the defeat at the Marne and that any addition withdrawals would have an adverse effect on the morale of the German troops.[57] Although he did not completely

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[54] Groener, Lebenserinnerungen, p.179.
[55] Wenninger to Bavarian Ministry of War, 14 September 1914, in Schulte, pp. 175-176.
[56] Erich von Falkenhayn, "Operationsplan am 15.9.14," quoted in a letter from the Reichsarchiv to Tappen, 26 February 1926, BA/MA, N56/3; Der Weltkrieg V, pp. 20-22.
[57] There is some evidence to suggest this belief came from the 1st Army itself. On 21 September 1914, Tappen told Hermann Ritter Mertz von Quirnheim, the Ia of the 6th Army, that the 1st Army had declared its troops would not bear further retreat. Mertz to Reicharchiv, 24 January 1924, BA/MA, W10/51177.

agree with Tappen's assessment, Falkenhayn was generally convinced by his arguments and agreed to scrap the plan of the 15th.[58]

Tappen's reasoning displays several important characteristics that would re-appear throughout the war. His assumptions, which became Falkenhayn's as well, would have far-reaching consequences. First, Tappen, and Falkenhayn with him, underestimated the French will power and their ability to continue resistance. At the same time, both men overestimated German strength, which by this point was ebbing away quickly. Based on this belief, Falkenhayn was convinced that the French were at the end of their strength and that only one final push was needed to win the war. The General Staff Chief would again seriously underestimate the strength of his enemies before the French offensive in the autumn of 1915 and at the beginning of his offensive at Verdun in early 1916. Additionally, both men overestimated the moral effect of a withdrawal upon their own troops. This belief caused them to rule out any withdrawal, even tactical, by German forces. By November, this idea was translated into policy which solidified the trench line. Falkenhayn would write: "Hold what you have, and never voluntarily surrender a square foot of land in the west."[59]

More immediately, Falkenhayn accepted Tappen's opinion that the French were nearly exhausted and that they offered no pressing threat to the army's right wing. With this pressing threat gone, he believed there was sufficient time to bring up the 6th Army without having to execute a strategic withdrawal. From 15 to 19 September, various orders to renew the offensive went forth from the OHL. Bülow's army group (1st, 2nd, and 7th Armies) was allowed to undertake its planned offensive. The 3rd, 4th, and 5th Armies were ordered to renew their assaults on the existing French positions.[60] These new attacks were to go forward quickly, "with the intention of passing under the enemy long-range artillery, overrunning the French infantry positions and capturing as quickly as possible the numerous enemy artillery pieces." These attacks were not intended to be decisive in themselves; rather they were to weaken the French further, to prevent them from shifting

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[58] Der Weltkrieg V, p.21. Herbert Rosinski judged this decision to be the real beginning of trench warfare, writing, "... it is the 15th [of September], the morning on which Falkenhayn decided against a return to the mobile strategy of the first weeks, *that must be considered the real turning point of the war*." Herbert Rosinski, The German Army (Washington: The Infantry Journal, 1944) p.91. Italics in the original.

[59] Falkenhayn to Colmar von der Goltz, 16 November 1914, quoted in Der Weltkrieg V, p.585. Falkenhayn's policy may also have been influenced by the Kaiser's view on retreat. On 7 September, he had ordered: "Angreifen, solange es geht – unter keinen Umständen einen Schritt zürück." Quoted in Mombauer, op.cit., p.228.

[60] Der Weltkrieg V, pp. 34-55.

additional forces to their left wing, and to demonstrate to the Entente that the German offensive strength was not exhausted.[61]

Although he had rejected a tactical withdrawal, Falkenhayn decided to carry out a grand strategic flanking maneuver along the lines of Schlieffen.[62] The ultimate decision was to come from the intervention of the 6th Army on the right wing, which had begun its re-deployment on 17 September. He informed the Bavarian Kronprinz Rupprecht, the commander of the 6th Army, that "the main goal of the [6th] Army must be ... to achieve the decision of battle [*Schlachtentscheidung*] on the right wing of the army as soon as possible."[63] However, by the 18th, the French were again threatening the German right with envelopment with units from quieter areas of the front.[64] This forced Falkenhayn to set the 6th Army a secondary task. Falkenhayn wrote, "6th Army must use the first arriving units ... to throw back the enemy force which has recently arrived on the right flank of the army and thereby take over the task of securing the army's right flank."[65] The General Staff Chief hoped, however, that the French units would be in no condition to put up a determined fight. He informed Rupprecht that the French units were now hopelessly "mixed with one another" and that many French units on their left wing had previously been defeated by the 6th Army in Lorraine.[66]

The French, however, were not as exhausted as Tappen and Falkenhayn believed and the German attacks were unsuccessful in preventing them from transferring troops to their left wing. Using their better rail communications, they were able to shift their forces faster than the Germans.[67] Thus, as the first units of the 6th Army arrived on the German right wing, they were thrown immediately into battle to defend against a French envelopment. The 6th Army's secondary task, the protection of the right wing, became of necessity its primary task. For the next several weeks, the two opponents fed units,

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[61] [Wilhelm] Solger, "Die Umstellung der Ob.Heeres-Ltg. vom Bewegungs- zum Stellungs-Krieg (IX./X.1914)," (Forschungsarbeit zu Band V), unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/51151, pp. 8-9 and pp. 11-12.
[62] Jehuda Wallach, The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986) pp. 128-129.
[63] Falkenhayn to 6th Army, 18 September 1914, quoted in Solger, "Umstehung," p.15.
[64] Der Weltkrieg V, p.61.
[65] Falkenhayn to 6th Army, 18 September 1914, quoted in Solger, "Umstellung," p.15.
[66] Kronprinz Rupprecht von Bayern, Mein Kriegstagebuch Vol 1 (ed. Eugen von Frauenholz) (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1929) p.127.
[67] Ministère de la Guerre, Les Armées Française dans la Grande Guerre Tome I\Vol.4: La Bataille de l'Aisne, la Course à la Mer, la Bataille des Flanders, les Opérations sur le Front Stabilisé (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1933) pp. 147-176

stripped from quieter sections of the front, on to the western flank piecemeal, in an attempt to outflank each other.[68]

After the failure of the 6th Army to decide the issue with a flank attack, Falkenhayn again returned to the idea of building a strong strike force on the extreme right wing. As part of this attempt, the 4th Army was rebuilt out of the III Reserve Corps, which had recently been freed for further action with the fall of Antwerp, and four reserve corps, which had been formed after the war's outbreak by volunteers.[69] This new attack was supplied liberally with the heavy artillery freed by the capture of Antwerp.[70] On 10 October, Falkenhayn assigned the 4th Army its tasks: "The 4th Army is to advance, *without regard for casualties*, with its right wing resting on the coast, first on the fortresses of Dunkirk and Calais ... then to swing south ... at St.Omer."[71] In conjunction with the 6th Army, the 4th Army was to smash the vulnerable left flank of the Entente forces and thereby deal the enemy an "annihilating blow."[72]

By 21 October, Falkenhayn's offensive was in progress. However, the desired results were again lacking. The 4th Army, composed mainly of hastily trained recruits, moved only slowly forward. Once again, the enemy was not as weak as the OHL had believed and was able to hold off the German attacks from hurriedly prepared defensive positions. Yet the 4th and 6th Armies continued attacking, in the belief that the enemy was near collapse, suffering severe casualties in frontal attacks poorly supported by artillery preparation.[73] From mid-October to the beginning of November, the 4th Army had suffered 39,000 dead and wounded and 13,000 missing. The 6th Army had lost 27,000 casualties and 1,000 missing.[74]

By early November it had become clear that the campaign would not be decided in Flanders. However, refusing for the moment to shift the main German effort to the east, Falkenhayn decided to continue operations at Ypres. Instead of attempting to win a "decisive" battle, the General Staff Chief now aimed at a more limited goal. He now

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[68] For the details of this stage in the "race to the sea," see Der Weltkrieg V, pp. 69-118.
[69] Kriegsministerium, MI Nr. 3531/14 A1, 16 August 1914, in USNA, Documents of the Royal Prussian Military Cabinet (Microfilm Publication M-962), Roll 3; Wrisberg, op.cit., pp. 15-19.
[70] This artillery force amounted to 20 batteries of heavy field howitzers, 12 batteries of 21-cm howitzers, and 6 batteries of 10-cm cannon. Der Weltkrieg V, p.282.
[71] Quoted in Der Weltkrieg V, p.279. Italics added.
[72] Mertz to Reichsarchiv, 24 January 1924, BA/MA, W10/51177.
[73] For the most recent account from the German perspective, which strips away much of the myth surrounding this battle, see Karl Unruh, Langemarck: Legende und Wirklichkeit (Koblenz: Bernard & Graefe, 1986).
[74] Der Weltkrieg V, p.401.

instructed the 4th Army to seize Ypres, "the central point of the enemy's defensive position," and Mount Kemmel. Although this would only be a "local result," Falkenhayn believed it would be of great value to the overall situation on the Western Front.[75]

It soon became clear, however, that even this limited goal would be more difficult than anticipated. On 8 November, Falkenhayn informed the Kaiser that operations in Flanders had come to a standstill, "the barbed wire cannot be crossed." Despite being pressured by the 4th and 6th Armies to continue the offensive,[76] two days later he told the Kaiser that he intended to call off the operations in Flanders as soon as the town of Ypres had been taken. The General Staff Chief felt that the Germans "could no longer reckon on any great success" in the west.[77] The German troops were exhausted and the ammunition for the heavy artillery was almost completely spent.[78] Even the limited goal of capturing Ypres eluded the Germans, and Falkenhayn was forced to order the *Westheer* onto the defensive while he dealt with the growing threat in the east.[79]

The campaign's failure could be put down to a number factors, some of which were temporary. The German attacks, though supported by the siege train freed by the fall of Antwerp, lacked munitions and thus could not be properly supported by heavy artillery. Second, the four reserve corps employed were inadequately trained and led, and were completely incapable of the demands of conducting a breakthrough of a prepared enemy position, even one as primitively prepared as the positions at Ypres. Third, the attacks generally proceeded without proper artillery preparation or support, the infantry believing speed to be more important than careful preparation. The Ypres offensive, however, had shown forcefully the difficulties of attempting a "decisive" battle under the conditions of 1914.

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[75] AOK 4, "Kriegstagebuch," 4 November 1914, quoted in "Die deutsche Oberste Heeresleitung im Westen von 4.-28. November 1914," (Forschungsarbeit zu Bd.VI), unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/51159, p.2 (Hereafter, "Die OHL im Westen"); Mertz, "Tagebuch," 12 November 1914, BA/MA, W10/51177; Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 4 November 1914.

[76] Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen to Reichsarchiv, 3 November 1926, BA/MA, W10/51176; "Die OHL im Westen," p.15.

[77] Plessen, "Tagebuch," 8 and 10 November 1914; Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, pp. 33-34.

[78] By 12 November, the German army had munitions remaining for only 6 more days of combat. Redern, "Tagebuch," 12 November 1914; Mertz recalled that on at least one occasion, German officers had to threaten their men with pistols to get them out of the trenches to attack the enemy. Mertz to Reichsarchiv, 24 January 1924, BA/MA, W10/51177. In 10 days of combat around Ypres, the attacking units had suffered 160,000 casualties. Plessen, "Tagebuch," 16 November 1914.

[79] Despite the "decisive" victory at Tannenberg, the Russians were threatening to knock Austria-Hungary from the war. The best efforts of the German units in the east were having little effect against the Russian "steamroller." Reinforcement was necessary to stabilize the front and inflict a setback upon the Russians. See Der Weltkrieg VI, pp. 34-218; Herwig, op.cit., pp. 106-113.

The new General Staff Chief's attempt at bringing the war to a successful conclusion in the west had failed. The French had matched his flanking movements at each step and neither side had been able to gain an advantage. Further, the French troops were not as exhausted as Falkenhayn and Tappen continually held and German troops were more fatigued than either believed. Wherever the opposing sides met each other, progress came to a halt and improvised field positions arose. All attempts to break through these positions were repulsed with great loss. By the end of the Ypres campaign, the German army was "exhausted." Since the beginning of the war, it had suffered some 800,000 casualties, including some 116,000 dead.[80] With the failure to bring the war rapidly to a close in the west, Germany now faced the nightmare of a two-front war against roughly equal opponents. Moltke the Elder's great fear, a *Volkskrieg* of indeterminate duration, had come to pass.

Falkenhayn's New Strategic Direction

The failure at Ypres had far-reaching consequences. First, the inability to break through the primitive Entente trenches meant that mobility could not be restored to the front. Over the next several months, these primitive trenches would become increasingly sophisticated and even more difficult to break through. Second, the failure of the offensive and the high casualties had caused Falkenhayn to re-think fundamentally German strategy. Although the Reichsarchiv's claim that he went through an "inner change" at this stage that led him to question his ability as Chief of the General Staff is overstated, clearly the failure of all his attempts to bring the war to a decisive end had an impact upon him.[81] Wild wrote to his wife that Falkenhayn, "carries with difficulty the weight of the responsibility of being both Minister of War and General Staff Chief, and is not sure of himself."[82]

From this experience, however, the General Staff Chief reached important conclusions about the future course of the war. Already by early November he was convinced that "decisive" victory was not possible with the forces at Germany's disposal in the west. The question then arose, whether or not to shift the focus of German efforts

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[80] Herwig, op.cit., p.119.
[81] Der Weltkrieg VI, p.437; Afflerbach, Falkenhayn, pp. 211-212. The Reichsarchiv's claim may also have been an attempt to cast aspersions upon Falkenhayn's subsequent strategic decisions.
[82] Wild to his wife, 10 November 1914, N324/44. The failure at Ypres also led others in the army to question Falkenhayn's competence see, Afflerbach, Falkenhayn, pp. 211-217.

to the east, a strategy favored by a number of German leaders, most notably Hindenburg and Ludendorff. With respect for Russia's military potential, the General Staff Chief rejected this. Not for the last time, Falkenhayn raised the spectre of Napoleon's experience in Russia as a justification for not becoming involved deeply in the east.[83]

The day he called off the offensive at Ypres, Falkenhayn responded to Hindenburg's request for additional troops. In his letter, the General Staff Chief expressed his doubts as to whether or not Germany could expect anything more than limited results under current conditions.[84] He wrote that it would be easier for him to send reinforcement to the east

> ...wenn eine begründete Hoffnung bestände, dass das Eintreffen neuer Kräfte in dem in den Grenzen des Möglichen liegenden Umfange eine endgültige Entscheidung im Osten herbeiführen würde. Diese Hoffnung besteht indessen augenscheinlich nicht. Im besten Falle wird es uns gelingen, den Feind hinter die Narew- und Weichsel-Linie zurückzudrücken und ihn zur Räumung Galiziens zu zwingen. Eine Kriegsentscheidung liegt darin an sich noch nicht, wenn ich auch nicht bestreiten kann, dass eine solcher Erfolg von weittragender politischer Bedeutung sein kann.[85]

The clear difficulties of finding a military solution to the war with the forces at Germany's disposal led Falkenhayn to take a radical step. He now asked the Chancellor to find a diplomatic solution to Germany's strategic situation, admitting that there was no military solution.[86] The new General Staff Chief had returned to an idea from Moltke the Elder's war plans; military success would serve as a springboard for a negotiated peace with at least one of Germany's enemies.

On 18 November, Falkenhayn met with Bethmann and asked him to conclude a separate peace with one of Germany's enemies. The General Staff Chief believed that this was the only way in which sufficient forces could be collected to achieve a "decisive" victory against the remaining enemies. Bethmann later conveyed the content of the conversation to the Under State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, Arthur Zimmermann:

> This is how General von Falkenhayn judges the situation:

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[83] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.14 and p.35.
[84] Ibid., p.35.
[85] Falkenhayn to Hindenburg, 18 November 1914, quoted in Der Weltkrieg VI, p.95.
[86] Herwig, op.cit., p.117. Herwig's statement that this was the "first time in German history" that a Chief of Staff asked a Chancellor to negotiate a peace is a bit too sweeping. Clearly, Moltke the Elder worked closely with Bismarck. He also wrote into his war plans after 1870 the necessity of coming to terms with his enemy after initial victories, a task which would fall to Germany's diplomats.

> As long as Russia, France and England stay together it is impossible for us to defeat our opponents in such a way that we can make a decent peace. On the contrary we would run the risk of slowly exhausting ourselves. Either Russia or France must be detached. If we can succeed in causing Russia to make peace – and in first line this is what we should try to do – then we will be able to defeat France and England so decisively that we could dictate the peace.... It is, however, to be expected with certainty that if Russia should make peace, France would also sing a different tune. Then, if England were not completely acquiescent we would wear her down, starving her out by means of a blockade based in Belgium, even though some months would be necessary to do so.[87]

Falkenhayn felt that the "psychological moment for contact with Russia would be at hand if General Hindenburg should succeed in defeating the Russians in the battles now taking place." With Russia out of the picture, Germany could concentrate her forces, and perhaps count on Austro-Hungarian aid, to defeat her enemies in the west.

Falkenhayn's conversation with Bethmann revealed the General Staff Chief's views about Germany's enemies. Clearly, he felt that peace could be obtained easily with Russia and that between the two countries there was no deep conflict. He also believed that, if a negotiated peace could be agreed with Russia, it was likely France would follow. Great Britain was another matter. Falkenhayn believed that Britain was Germany's main enemy and that Britain's "*Vernichtungswille*" and hatred for Germany meant a negotiated peace between the two nations was almost impossible.[88] Only after her Continental allies had been defeated could Britain herself be truly engaged.[89]

Falkenhayn had, in essence, come to a strategy reminiscent of Delbrück's *Ermattungsstrategie*. After November 1914, he no longer aimed at a dictated peace brought about by a decisive victory, at least in the first stage of the war. Instead, the General Staff Chief now aimed at detaching at first one of his enemies from the anti-German coalition. With one front gone, sufficient forces would be available to force Germany's other enemies to the peace table. Rather than great "decisive" battles, smaller victories would serve a political goal – they would convince Germany's enemies that the

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[87] Bethmann to Zimmermann, 18 November 1914, printed in Paul R. Sweet, "Leaders and Policies: Germany in the Winter of 1914-1915," Journal of Central European Affairs Vol.XVI Nr.3 (1956) p.232.
[88] Falkenhayn's view that Britain would fight on even after her Continental allies had been defeated was shared by his predecessor, Moltke the Younger. See Hermann von Kuhl, Der Weltkrieg 1914-1918 Vol. 1 (Berlin: W.Kolk, 1929) p.165.
[89] Falkenhayn wrote that Britain planned to win the war by following a strategy of "starvation and attrition." Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, pp. 23-24; Afflerbach, Falkenhayn, pp. 198-210.

price of continuing the war was too high to pay. With Germany's Continental enemies gone, she would be free to fight a long war against her real enemy, Great Britain.

Stellungskrieg and Doctrine

While the Germany army went to war in 1914 well-equipped with entrenching tools, they had always looked upon trenches and field fortifications as temporary tactical devices. Thus, the section on defense in the 1906 edition of the Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie ran:

> A defense, which is directed at not only to repelling an attack, but also at bringing about a victory, must be paired with offensive action. A defensive position, then, only has value when it forces the enemy to attack, thereby producing ... the required time or the favorable conditions necessary for the defender's own attack.[90]

Bewegungskrieg, not *Stellungskrieg*, was to be the method of waging war and, as we have seen in Chapter 3, German writers before the war stressed that only through offensive action could a decision be reached.

The failure of Falkenhayn's flank attacks brought the whole Western Front to a standstill. By mid-November 1914, the German and Entente forces found themselves facing each other in almost unbroken trenches running from the Channel coast to the Swiss border. While these field positions were rudimentary compared with the sophisticated systems of later in the war, they were sufficiently strong to repel all but the most determined and well-supported attacks. The strength of defensive weapons, initially the magazine-fed rifle and the artillery piece, but increasingly as the war progressed the machinegun and trench mortar, combined with the protection offered by earthworks, brought an end to the war of movement and ushered in position warfare.[91] Thus, by early November 1914, the German army faced not only a crisis in strategy, but also a doctrinal crisis.

This shift from *Bewegungskrieg* to *Stellungskrieg* came in stages, as both sides shifted forces to their northernmost flanks in the attempt to outflank each other. Despite its gradual appearance, the shift from a war of movement proved a shock to German

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[90] Kriegsministerium, Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie, 1906, para. 398-399.
[91] See General der Infanterie a.D. Wöllwarth, "Die Ursachen des Stellungskrieges," Deutsche Wehr Nr.18 (3 May 1934) p.271; Hew Strachan, European Armies and the Conduct of War (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983) pp. 137ff.

soldiers. On 26 September, Tappen recorded in his diary, "it appears more and more that we have before us field fortifications across the entire front – *a completely new form of warfare*."[92] Unlike Tappen, Major von Redern, the first general staff officer of the *Operationsabteilung*, recognized this situation, recording in his diary, "it is a repetition of the conditions of the Russo-Japanese War. We stand facing the Entente armies in an unbroken line."[93] Plessen recorded the potential problem this would cause for Germany: "It has turned out to be a regular war of siege [*Belagerungskrieg*], which may last a long time, and we do not have the time."[94]

Despite their abhorrence of *Stellungskrieg*, the German army was in fact in a relatively good position both conceptually and materially to adjust to its inception in 1914. In intellectual terms, before the war, a number of authors had seen the necessity of training for "prepared attacks" as well as "encounter battles." Although Sigismund von Schlichting is today better remembered for his ideas about the operational level of war, he was also a proponent of the "prepared attack" – attacks which would need to be carefully prepared by artillery and rifle fire. Schlichting was successful in having his ideas incorporated into the drill regulations in 1888. In theory, this led the Germans to place importance on achieving fire superiority before any assault on an enemy prepared position.[95] The advent of *Stellungskrieg* would cause a return to these ideas.

The ability to adapt to the new conditions was further helped by the material factors in the German army. In 1914, the German army was unusually well equipped with heavy artillery. This was especially the case with howitzers. The German army went to war with over 950 light field howitzers (10.5 cm), 18 to each active division, and over 450 heavy field howitzers (15 cm) deployed with its active corps. These artillery pieces fired at a high angle, which was crucial for hitting entrenched and defiladed targets. Additionally, their high angle of fire allowed them to be deployed in defilade much more easily than flat-trajectory guns.[96] The German army possessed a large number of *Minenwerfer*, or trench mortars. These weapons were relative light and could lob extremely heavy charges at very high angles. They were, thus, ideal for deployment with

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[92] Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 26 September 1914. Italics added.
[93] Redern, "Kriegstagebuch," 20 September 1914.
[94] Plessen, "Tagebuch," 9 November 1914.
[95] William Balck, "Ueber den Infantrieangriff," M-W Nr.29 (1919) pp. 561-566.
[96] By comparison, the French, reliant as they were on the 75mm gun, had no howitzers below army level at the war's outbreak. Bruce I. Gudmundsson, On Artillery (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995) pp. 31-38.

the infantry in the forward positions.[97] These high-angle weapons would play a crucial role in trench warfare.

By November 1914, the German army was not blind to the shortcomings in its pre-war doctrine. The campaign in the west since August had showed some glaring tactical problems in the German army. German units, accustomed as they were to *Bewegungskrieg*, often attacked without adequate preparation. *Generalleutnant* Karl Ritter von Wenninger, the Bavarian military plenipotentiary in the OHL, recorded this: "The attacking infantry are determined not to wait for artillery preparation. They are governed completely by the phrase: 'Forward, cost what it may.'"[98] Other German officers made similar observations. This attitude, in part brought on by the lack of any combined arms regulations, had cost the German army, especially the officer corps, dearly in the early battles.[99] It was clear by late 1914 that the Germans would have to rethink their method of attack in the light of the prevalent tactical conditions.[100] The experience of the III Army Corps at Vailly in late October pointed one way out of this tactical dilemma.

The III Corps, part of the 1st Army, had retreated to the Aisne River following the Battle of the Marne. There, they took up defensive positions on the north bank of the river, which at 50-65 meters in width was a formidable obstacle. Their position was further strengthened by the fact that they controlled the high ground on the north bank of the river. However, Entente forces had managed to cross the river in several areas and gain a bridgehead that threatened the German defenses. The III Corps therefore resolved to carry out an attack on the French positions at Vailly to clear the north bank of the enemy.[101] This battle became a model "attack with limited objectives" for the German army, the lessons from which were studied by the army's other units and which were put into practice later in the war.[102]

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[97] On Minenwerfers see, Bruce I. Gudmundsson, "Trench Mortars," Tactical Notebook March 1992.
[98] Quoted in Schulte, op.cit., p.173. Wenninger was quoting paragraph 265 of the Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie.
[99] Liebmann, "Die deutschen Gefechtsvorschriften von 1914 in der Feuerprobe des Krieges," MWR Jg.1937 H.4, pp. 456-487.
[100] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.41.
[101] Der Weltkrieg V, p.353; Hans von Seeckt, Aus meinem Leben 1866-1917 (ed. Friedrich von Rabenau) (Leipzig: v.Hase & Koehler, 1938) pp. 77-78.
[102] The following is based on a translation of Major Arthur Bullrich's article, "Die Schlacht bei Vailly am 30.X.1914 als Ausgangspunkt für die Erfolge bei Gorlice entscheidener neuer taktischer Grundsätze," which appeared in Tactical Notebook November 1992-March 1993. The original is in the USNA, Seeckt Papers (Microfilm Publication M-132), Roll 20. See also Seeckt, op.cit., pp. 77-81.

The key to the operation's success was close co-operation between the infantry, artillery, and pioneers and careful preparation of the battlefield. The III Corps' attack order highlighted this:

> In order to prepare the attack, the night of the 28th and 29th is to be devoted to the most intense reconnaissance by all arms of service for the working forward [*heranarbeiten*] of the infantry and pioneers towards the most forward enemy infantry positions or barbed-wire entanglements, for the emplacement of the artillery and the light and heavy trench mortars.[103]

This reconnaissance was designed to identify key enemy strongpoints which would have to be either avoided by the attacking infantry or, if they could not be avoided, neutralized by the artillery. The assault was only to proceed after the artillery had prepared the way. The preparatory fire was to proceed in *Feuerwellen* (fire waves) through the night of the 29th and early morning of the 30th. During the pauses between *Feuerwellen*, the infantry and pioneers would advance to clear obstacles and check the results of the fire. The pauses also served to disorient the enemy and keep them guessing as to when the real attack would commence.

In addition to preparing the way for the attacking infantry thoroughly, the artillery was to co-operate closely with the infantry during its advance. Although most of the artillery was to shift to targets behind the enemy's front line and to the flanks of the attack to prevent the French from reinforcing the threatened area, a portion was to advance with the attacking infantry to provide close support. Great emphasis was placed on direct observation by the artillery and the artillery observers stayed close to the front line to direct fire. The placement of the artillery under a single commander allowed the Germans to combine the fire of the Corps' widely distributed artillery against single targets when needed. Further, the infantry attack was scheduled to advance in phases to ensure the continued support of the artillery.

At 8:00am on 30 October, the III Corps launched its attack. By 8:30, the attacking force had succeeded in occupying the first enemy position "almost without firing a shot." The attacking German infantry found a "shaken and surprised enemy incapable of combat." By 6:00pm, the French had been pushed back over the Aisne and the town of Vailly had been taken. In all around 2,000 Frenchmen had been taken prisoner and many more had lost their lives. The Germans lost around 3,500 officers and men. Thanks to

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[103] III Army Corps, "Order for the Day," 28 October 1914, printed in Bullrich, op.cit.

"thorough preparation and to sympathetic and systematic co-operation between the different arms," the III Corps' attack achieved all its objectives, and proved that offensives could succeed in the conditions prevalent in 1914 if properly carried out.

Although the offensive at Vailly was only a minor affair, it provided important lessons for the rest of the army for how to conduct attacks against enemy trenches. The rise of *Stellungskrieg* obviously demanded that the German army develop new skills. The attack at Vailly had shown the importance of close infantry/artillery co-operation and how artillery should be employed in trench warfare.[104] Further, it showed that, under the right conditions, the enemy's trench line could be pierced. Not long after the success of the offensive, Falkenhayn ordered the 1st Army's reports to be circulated to the rest of the *Westheer* for study.[105] In addition to its doctrinal impact, the attack also made a name for the Corps' chief of staff, *Oberst* Hans von Seeckt. Seeckt would put his experience from Vailly to good use in May 1915 as Chief of Staff to the 11th Army at the breakthrough at Gorlice-Tarnow.

Conclusion

Despite paying lip service to Falkenhayn's desire to conclude a separate peace with Russia, in fact Bethmann did not believe the idea could work. He found support for this view from within the *Auswärtiges Amt* and from within the army itself. Arthur Zimmermann stressed to the Chancellor that Russia was Germany's greatest threat and that only a severe military defeat would deal with this threat.[106] The German command in the east, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, felt that a "decisive" military victory was possible against Russia, if only they were given the necessary resources.[107]

This difference of opinion split the German leadership for the rest of Falkenhayn's tenure as Chief of the General Staff. The immediate result, however, was a paralysis in German strategy. With Bethmann unwilling to pursue aggressively a diplomatic solution and Falkenhayn unable and reluctant to supply large forces to the east, nothing positive was accomplished for the period following the failure of the Ypres offensive. Further, this split poisoned relations between Germany's strategic leaders.

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[104] Der Weltkrieg V, p.354; Grosser Generalstab, "Die Entwicklung der deutschen Infanterie im Weltkrieg 1914-1918," MWR Jg.3 H.3 (1938) pp. 37-375.
[105] Der Weltkrieg Bd.VII: Operationen des Jahres 1915 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1931) p.317. (See Chapter 6.)
[106] Zimmermann to Bethmann, 27 November 1914, printed in Sweet, op.cit., pp. 236-239.

Bethmann spoke of Falkenhayn as a "gambler" and "execrable character," and concluded that he should be replaced by Ludendorff. For the next several months, the anti-Falkenhayn clique carried out a campaign to have him removed from his position.[108]

This strategic debate, which had turned into a bitter personal feud, had a lasting impact. Falkenhayn's reluctance to shift the main focus of German effort to the east earned him the lasting odium of many in the army. After the war, Hans von Haeften was named head of the section of the Reichsarchiv charged with writing the official history. In 1914/1915, Haeften had been one of the strongest supporters of an eastern strategy and one of Falkenhayn's most bitter opponents.[109] As a consequence Der Weltkrieg expressed Haeften's bias.[110] The work repeated the assertion that Falkenhayn lacked the training under Schlieffen, which would have given him the skills necessary to be a good commander. They also believed that the new General Staff Chief was "too easily satisfied with minor ... victories."[111] In short, the Reichsarchiv concluded that Falkenhayn did not have the vision or the authority required to make the difficult decisions necessary to defeat his enemies totally, and they placed responsibility for the strategic paralysis at the turn of 1914/1915 squarely on the shoulders of Falkenhayn.[112]

In fact, it was Falkenhayn who had come to the radical, and surely more difficult, conclusion that the German army alone could not win the war. In this, he certainly broke from the traditions of the Schlieffen clique within the army, represented most forcefully by Ludendorff and his supporters. He was, however, returning to the ideas of Moltke the Elder, who, as we have seen in Chapter 1, believed that a modern *Volkskrieg* could only be solved by co-operation between the army and the diplomats.

With the failure of Germany's diplomats to conclude a negotiated peace with Russia in late 1914, Falkenhayn realized that further military success would be necessary to bring one of Germany's enemies to the negotiating table. Accordingly, he set about

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[107] Bethmann learned of OberOst's views during his visit to their headquarters on 6 December. Der Weltkrieg VI, pp. 415-416.

[108] In the end, Falkenhayn was forced to surrender his position as Minister of War. Space prevents a detailed discussion of the intrigues against Falkenhayn. See Afflerbach, op.cit., pp. 218-232; Heinz Krafft, Staatsräson und Kriegführung im kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914-1916: Der Gegensatz zwischen dem Generalstabschef von Falkenhayn und dem Oberbefehlshaber Ost im Rahmen des Bündniskrieges der Mittelmächte (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1980).

[109] For Haeften's role in the intrigues against Falkenhayn, see Guth, op.cit., pp.75-111.

[110] Several officers complained about the eastern bias of the work. Hans Henning von Pentz to Reichsarchiv, 14 June 1930; and Eugen von Zoellner to Reichsarchiv, 10 June 1930, BA/MA, W10/51305.

[111] Der Weltkrieg V, pp. 8-9.

mobilizing Germany's economic and manpower resources – in short, creating a real "nation in arms."[113] He hoped, thereby, to raise enough new units to enable him to go once again on to the offensive. However, Falkenhayn stuck to his belief that Germany could not raise enough forces to defeat any of her enemies decisively. Therefore, any future offensive would have to be limited in scope.[114] In this the Reichsarchiv was correct: Falkenhayn was not about to risk everything on one throw in an attempt to win a "decisive" battle.

Indeed, Falkenhayn's conclusions took him much further than Moltke the Elder's ideas. By the end of 1914, he had chosen to pursue a strategy of attrition. Delbrück had demonstrated that Clausewitz had shown the time for *Ermattungsstrategie* was when a nation had only "modest political goals, weak motives, [or] limited strength."[115] To the new General Staff Chief, it was clear that Germany only possessed "limited strength." Without the capacity necessary to defeat her enemies totally, Falkenhayn believed that Germany would have to convince at least one enemy that the price of continuing the war was too great to pay. If the Chancellor could not do this through diplomacy alone, than Falkenhayn felt offensives with limited, but political, goals would have to be waged. After the failures of the initial campaigns, time was needed to rebuild German strength and to rethink German doctrine in light of the unexpected battlefield conditions.

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[112] The section concerning this period of the war in Der Weltkrieg was entitled "Entscheidungslose Kriegführung." Der Weltkrieg VI, pp. 405-433.
[113] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, pp. 44-49; Afflerbach, Falkenhayn, pp. 172-178.
[114] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, pp. 42-44.
[115] Hans Delbrück, "Die Strategie des Perikles," PJ 64.Bd. (1889) p.263.

Chapter Five:
Attack in the East

In both the west and the east, the opening offensives of the Central Powers in 1914 had failed. In the west, the German armies were forced to retreat from the Marne but still held significant portions of French territory and all but a slender portion of Belgium. The Austro-Hungarian forces had not quite fared as well in the east. Due in part to faulty deployment, the Habsburg forces neither conquered Serbia nor defeated the Russian forces arrayed against them. In fact, the Austro-Hungarian forces had not only failed to achieve their initial goals but had been driven with great losses from Serbia and from Austrian Galicia.[1] Within 3 weeks of the beginning of the Austro-Hungarian offensive against the Russians, they had suffered over 300,000 casualties and prisoners of war, close to a third of the strength of the Austro-Hungarian army at the war's outbreak. A further 100,000 men were trapped in the besieged fortress of Przemysl.[2]

A series of ill-fated offensives in the autumn and winter failed to alter the situation in Austria-Hungary's favor. Though Przemysl was relieved on 10 October 1914, it was besieged again when the Austro-Hungarian forces were forced to pull back by Russian counter-attacks. Despite their best efforts, the combined offensives of the *Oberbefehlshaber Ost* (OberOst), the German command in the east, and the *Armee-Oberkommando* (AOK), the Austro-Hungarian general staff, came to nothing but the attrition of the Habsburg army.[3]

By the spring of 1915, Austria-Hungary was in deep trouble. The offensives of the past several months had reduced the army to a shell of its pre-war capability. In December, Conrad had told the Austrian Foreign Minister, Leopold von Berchtold, that,

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[1] For a narrative of the beginning stages of the war see, Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg 1914 bis 1918: Bd I: Die Grenzschlachten im Westen (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1925) and Bd II: Die Befreiung Ostpreußens (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1925). For the Austro-Hungarian side, Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg 1914-1918: Bd I: Das Kriegsjahr 1914 (Vienna: Verlag der Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen, 1931).

[2] Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg 1914-1918 I, pp. 319-320.

[3] See Der Weltkrieg: Bd VII: Die Operationen des Jahres 1915: Die Ereignisse im Winter und Frühjahr (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1931) and Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg Bd II: Das Kriegsjahr 1915 (Erster Teil) (Vienna: Verlag der Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen, 1931) for full accounts of the offensives.

"the best officers and non-commissioned officers have died or have been removed from service, likewise the core of the rank and file." Further, he believed that unless something radical was done soon Austria-Hungary "...could no longer master the military situation."[4] In the opinion of most Austro-Hungarian military leaders, the Habsburg army had ceased to exist after the failure of the winter offensive. Indeed, from this point onwards, the Austro-Hungarian official history refers to the army as merely a collection of *Landsturm* and militia.[5] Contemporary German assessments of the worth of the Habsburg troops were equally damning.[6]

The great losses of the winter offensives were further exacerbated by Russian successes. The Austrians had been unable to relieve the besieged fortress of Przemysl or to push the Russians back from the Carpathian Mountains. On 22 March, Przemysl's governor, Hermann Kusmanek von Burgneustädten, ordered the fortress' surrender and its garrison of 120,000 went into Russian captivity. Shortly before the fall of Przemysl, the commander of the Russian Southwest Front, General N.Y. Ivanov, had been ordered by the Russian high command to complete the destruction of the Austro-Hungarian army.[7] To accomplish this task, Ivanov intended to drive through the Carpathian passes to the Hungarian Plain. His 30 divisions, now reinforced by the force that had besieged Przemysl, slowly pushed the Austro-Hungarians back through the Carpathian passes. The Carpathian Mountains constituted the last natural obstacle before the Hungarian Plain, and once these crucial passes were lost, Conrad had no hope of stopping the Russians from taking Budapest. This fresh pressure caused Conrad to launch at his German ally increasingly shrill cries for help.

Initially, the OHL saw the AOK as too pessimistic and rebuffed Conrad's pleas.[8] On 25 March, Falkenhayn telegraphed *Generalmajor* August von Cramon, the German liaison officer with the AOK, for an assessment of the situation. Falkenhayn questioned how the intervention of two German divisions, as Conrad requested, could alter the situation.[9] Cramon replied the next day that it was no longer clear whether the Austrians, particularly the 3rd Army fighting in the Carpathians against superior Russian forces,

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[4] Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf, Aus meiner Dienstzeit Vol. 5 (Vienna: Rikola Verlag, 1925) p.753.
[5] Holger Herwig, The First World War: Germany and Austria 1914-1918 (London: Arnold, 1997) p.137.
[6] Gerhard Tappen, Meine Kriegserinnerungen, unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/50661, p.106.
[7] Norman Stone, The Eastern Front, 1914-1917 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975) pp. 120-121.
[8] "Bei den Oesterreichern scheint man die Lage für sehr schwarz anzusehen." Gerhard Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 2 April 1915, BA/MA, N56/1.
[9] Falkenhayn to Cramon, 25 March 1915, OHL Nr.632 OIb, BA/MA, W10/51388.

could hold against further Russian attacks. In his opinion, the intervention of even a few German divisions would help to stabilize the situation.[10] To this end, two German divisions, called the *Beskidenkorps*, were despatched in early April to shore up the threatened 3rd Austro-Hungarian Army.[11]

Conrad kept up his pleas for help even after the despatch of the *Beskidenkorps*, threatening in a meeting with Falkenhayn in Berlin to sue for peace with Russia if further German help was not forthcoming.[12] Conrad's gloomy view of the situation was supported by Cramon. His reports stressed the weakness of the Austrian forces and the growing necessity of German support. On 6 April, he wrote that the Austro-Hungarian forces could hold against a determined attack only if supported by German troops or commanded by German generals. His report concluded that further German support was "extremely desirable."[13] Falkenhayn came to the conclusion that if the Austro-Hungarian army could not hold the Carpathian line, the last meaningful natural obstacle before the Hungarian Plain, then Vienna would be lost within 6 weeks.[14]

Austria-Hungary's deteriorating military situation was made all the worse by the Central Powers' deteriorating diplomatic position. By the spring of 1915, Italy and Rumania were threatening to join with the Entente against the Central Powers. All attempts to convince them to join with the Central Powers floundered. Both states possessed sizeable armies, and the entry of either into the war before the military situation in the east was stabilized could lead to disastrous results.[15] Falkenhayn believed that Austria-Hungary would be forced from the war if faced with the necessity of fighting

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[10] Cramon to Falkenhayn, 26 March 1915, (No Akten Nr.), BA/MA, W10/51388. See also August von Cramon, Unser Oesterreichisch-Ungarischer Bundesgenosse im Weltkrieg (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1922) pp. 7-13 and Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg II, pp. 235-242.

[11] In fact, a number of German units and commanders had already been dispatched to aid Austro-Hungarian formations. The *Südarmee* was commanded by a German general, Alexander von Linsingen and was made up of Austrian and German units. Another German general, Remus von Woyrsch, commanded another mixed army to the north. The Austro-Hungarians feared, with good reason, that this increasing reliance on German troops and commanders would lessen their independence. See transcript of telephone conversations between Moritz Fleischmann (the Austrian liaison officer with OberOst) and AOK, 2 January 1915, BA/MA, W10/51373.

[12] Letter of Adolph Wild von Hohenborn (then Minister of War) to his wife, 3 April 1915, BA/MA, N44/3; and Hans von Plessen (commander of the Imperial Headquarters), "Tagebuch," 5 April 1915, BA/MA, W10/50656. Falkenhayn did not take Conrad's threat seriously.

[13] Cramon to Falkenhayn, 6 April 1915, Nr.460, BA/MA, W10/51388.

[14] Stone, op.cit., p.127. (Throughout this chapter, please refer to Map 3 at the end of this work.)

[15] Though the Italian Chief of Staff, Cadorna, boasted he could field a million troops within a month of receiving a moblization order, the Italians were able only to attack the Austro-Hungarians with 460,000 men in June 1915. When Rumania finally entered in August 1916, she had an army of 623,000. Herwig, op.cit., pp. 151-153 and p.218.

another enemy.[16] This fact pushed the German General Staff Chief to intervene in the east. If a victory could be achieved against the Russians, perhaps Italy and Rumania could be persuaded not to enter the war. At the very least, Falkenhayn hoped intervention by sizeable German forces would lead to an improvement in Austria-Hungary's military position.[17]

Thus, the severity of the military and diplomatic positions in April caused Falkenhayn to consider seriously, for the first time in the war, large scale intervention in the east. On 4 April, he telegraphed Cramon to enquire whether or not the railway lines and the general conditions in the area of Gorlice were good enough to support a "powerful thrust from the area of Gorlice in the direction of Sanok."[18] On 6 April, Cramon reported back that he believed the conditions favorable for a German attack of around four army corps supported by heavy guns in the second half of April.[19] For the next several days, Falkenhayn and his staff, who had been deeply involved in planning an offensive in the west, debated intervention in the east.[20] His operations officer, Gerhard Tappen, and the Minister of War, Adolf Wild von Hohenborn, argued that the German reserves should be held for use in the west. They believed that only in the case of an extreme emergency should German reserves be used in the east.[21] Finally, on 13 April, convinced of the perilous situation, Falkenhayn decided on the necessity of intervening in the east and sought the Kaiser's approval.[22]

The eastern intervention was made possible by a re-organization of German forces in the spring of 1915 planned by *Generalmajor* Ernst von Wrisberg, the director of

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[16] Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, pp. 94-95.

[17] Erich von Falkenhayn, General Headquarters and Its Critical Decisions, 1914-1916 (London: Hutchinson, 1919) pp. 78-81. Falkenhayn also believed a successful offensive would take troops away from the planned Russian offensive against Turkey, which intelligence had reported in April. Cramon to OHL, 21 April 1915, (No Akten Nr.), BA/MA, W10/50689.

[18] Falkenhayn to Cramon, 4 April 1915, (No Akten Nr.), BA/MA, W10/51388. In fact, the chief of the *Feldeisenbahnabteilung*, *Oberst* Wilhelm Groener, had been ordered by Falkenhayn on 29 March to study the railroads in the Gorlice aread in preparation for a possible German offensive. Wilhelm Groener, Lebenserinnerungen (ed.Friedrich Frhr. Hiller von Gaertringen) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957) pp. 226-227. After the war, a great debate arouse as to the originator of the idea for an attack from the area of Gorlice, with Conrad and Falkenhayn both claiming the honor. For an overview, see Oskar Regele, Feldmarschall Conrad: Auftrag und Erfüllung 1906-1918 (Vienna: Verlag Herlod, 1955) pp. 346-352.

[19] Cramon to Falkenhayn, 6 April 1915, Nr.460, BA/MA, W10/51388.

[20] For Falkenhayn's western plans, see Chapter 6.

[21] Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 7 April 1915; Wild von Hohenborn to his wife, 13 April 1915, BA/MA, N44/3.

[22] Plessen, "Tagebuch," 13 April 1915. The Kaiser and Plessen both had doubts about the feasibility of the planned operation and feared the Western Front would be fatally weakened by the removal of forces.

the *Allgemeines Kriegsdepartment* of the Ministry of War. Wrisberg created a number of new divisions by removing each division's fourth regiment and by taking two guns from each artillery battery. In return for the lost fourth regiment, each division received 2,400 recruits. This plan had the advantage of creating new units by mixing experienced troops with recruits, rather than creating a new division largely from scratch, and allowed for the formation of 14 new divisions by March 1915.[23] While some were held as reserves on the Western Front, eight divisions were organized as a new army, the 11th Army. Originally formed to conduct a breakthrough operation in the west, the 11th Army received Hans von Seeckt, then a colonel and chief of staff of the III Corps, as its chief of staff.[24] Once the OHL had decided to employ the army in the east instead, August von Mackensen, the commander of the 9th Army and participant in the Battle of Tannenberg, was named to command. On 14 April 1915, the OHL gave the 11th Army the task of carrying out the eastern offensive.

The 11th Army was to be assisted in its task by the strategic reserve of artillery, which had recently been formed by the OHL. *Oberst* Frahnert, the deputy chief of the *Artillerie-Abteilung* in the OHL, was given the task of adjusting the organization of the German *Fußartillerie* forces in the light of the rise of *Stellungskrieg*.[25] By stripping fortresses of their guns, by taking back into service recently retired cannon, and by an increased construction programme, the OHL was able to equip the 11th Army with 352 "light" cannon and 144 "heavy" cannon, or 496 guns of all calibers. To the German guns were added a further 200 Austro-Hungarian artillery pieces, a considerable number by the standards of early 1915.[26] Additionally, each of 11th Army's corps was assigned two light, one medium, and one heavy trench mortar detachment (*Minenwerfer Abteilung*), as well as a number of 30.5 cm Austro-Hungarian howitzers.[27]

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[23] Ernst von Wrisberg, Heer und Heimat 1914-1918 (Leipzig: KF Koehler, 1921) pp. 16-17 and Der Weltkrieg VII, p. 303. Originally, the Minister of War believed that 24 new divisions could be formed in this manner. In the end, they were only able to build 14.

[24] See Chapter 6.

[25] Frahnert to Reichsarchiv, 20 January 1931, BA/MA, W10/51408.

[26] "Beispiele für Artillerie-Stärken bei Durchbruchsangriffen," BA/MA, W10/50160. For an account of the artillery reorganization see Wrisberg, op.cit., pp. 36-43 and pp. 58-65 and [Richard] von Berendt, "Mit der Artillerie durch den Weltkrieg," WuW Jg.1924 pp. 36-47 and pp. 185-197.

[27] Oskar Tile von Kalm, Gorlice (Schlachten des Weltkrieges Bd.30) (Berlin: Gerhard Stalling, 1930) p. 29.

Falkenhayn's Strategic Principles

Armed with the Kaiser's approval to commence operations in the east, Falkenhayn met Conrad in Berlin on 14 April to agree upon the particulars. On the 16th, he telegraphed Conrad with the final details and outlined the 11th Army's task:

> Die aus zunächts 8 Infanterie-Divisionen neu zu gebildende 11.deutsche Armee unter dem Befehl des Generalobersten v.Mackensen ... wird in den Raum der k.u.k. 4.Armee südöstlich von Krakau transportiert, um, über die allgemeine Linie Gorlice-Gromik nach Osten vorstossend, im Verein mit der 4.Armee die russichen Stellungen zu durchbrechen und im weiteren Verlauf die russiche Karpathenfront westlich des Lupowpasses unhaltbar zu machen.[28]

The 11th Army was also to be assigned two Austro-Hungarian infantry divisions and a cavalry division, and the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army was to come under the orders of Mackensen. The 11th Army would receive its orders from the AOK, who would take "all important decisions in consultation with the German OHL."[29] Units of the 11th Army began transportation to the Eastern Front on 17 April and completed their deployment on 29 April. Mackensen's attack orders went to his corps on 29 April, with the attack to begin on 2 May. Thus, from the day of decision (13 April) to the day of attack (2 May) only 20 days elapsed. In this period, eight German divisions, a large park of artillery with munitions, and supplies sufficient to support a major offensive were transported east. In 20 days, Mackensen and Seeckt completed their operations plans. Speed was clearly one of Falkenhayn's goals.

In the course of the planning for the eastern intervention, important aspects of Falkenhayn's strategic thinking began to emerge clearly. Perhaps foremost amongst these was Falkenhayn's insistence on strategic surprise, which explains in part his haste. From the beginning of the decision to intervene in the east Falkenhayn had insisted on maintaining strict secrecy. In his initial query to Cramon on 4 April, he had even specified that the AOK was not to be informed of his plans.[30] Falkenhayn stated explicitly his belief in the importance of strategic surprise in a telegram to Conrad on 22 April,

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[28] Falkenhayn to Conrad, 16 April 1915, OHL Nr.727 OIb, BA/MA, W10/50744.
[29] Ibid. The 11th Army was composed of the *Gardekorps*, XXXXI Reserve Corps, X Corps, 119th Division, the 11th Bavarian Division, the Austro-Hungarian VI Corps and the Austro-Hungarian 11th Cavalry Division.
[30] Falkenhayn to Cramon, 4 April 1915, (No Akten Nr.) BA/MA, W10/51388; OHL put little trust in the security measures of AOK. Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 2 July 1932, BA/MA, N56/5.

writing he believed an essential element of the operation's success was that "...*Generaloberst* von Mackensen not lose the advantage of surprise."[31]

As the planning progressed, the OHL took elaborate measures to ensure secrecy. First, the transported troops were not informed of their final destination and neither were most of the railroad officials.[32] The troops transported from the west were sent along northerly rail lines in an effort to make observers believe the troops were destined for Hindenburg's front in East Prussia. All unit designations were also obscured. In an effort to prevent spying in the immediate area of Gorlice, the local inhabitants were removed to the far rear of the battle area. Additionally, when German staff officers arrived to survey the positions their units would be occupying, they donned Austrian headgear so as not to give away their presence to the Russians. Also, German troops were to relieve Austro-Hungarian troops at night to minimize the chances of the Russians becoming suspicious at a great number of unit changes.[33] Last, Falkenhayn stressed to Conrad and to Mackensen that the attack should come as soon as the German forces had completed their deployment.[34]

Falkenhayn also proposed to keep the Russians guessing by carrying out a number of diversionary attacks. On 16 April, he ordered OberOst to execute an attack with the aim of "...deceiving the enemy for as long as possible as to our intentions, as well as binding the enemy forces north of the Pilica."[35] OberOst began a series of demonstrations. On 2 May, the German 9th Army launched an unsuccessful gas attack and the 10th Army began a series of local offensives. The real success came, however, with the "invasion" of the Courland. Initially opposed by no serious forces, a weak German force succeeded in taking most of this barren area, including the antiquated fortress of Libau, and in threatening Riga. The Russian high command was forced to divert forces away from Galicia to defend Riga.[36]

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[31] Falkenhayn to Conrad, 22 April 1915, Nr.754 OIb, BA/MA, W10/50689.
[32] Leonhard Graf von Rothkirch Freiherr von Trach, Gorlice-Tarnow (Der große Krieg in Einzeldarstellungen H.21) (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1918) pp. 18-19.
[33] Trach, op.cit., pp. 26-27; Kalm, op.cit., pp. 21, 24, 27; Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, p.97.
[34] Falkenhayn to Conrad, 22 April 1915, Nr.754 OIb, BA/MA, W10/50689 and transcript of a telephone conversation between Falkenhayn and Seeckt, 27 April 1915, in Seeckt, op.cit., p.119.
[35] Falkenhayn to OberOst, 16 April 1915, Nr.726 OIb, BA/MA, W10/50744.
[36] Erich Ludendorff, Meine Kriegserinnerungen (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1919) pp. 109-112; Stone, op.cit., p.172. In all, the Russians were forced to deploy 9 infantry and 9 cavalry divisions to face the German's 5 infantry and 7 ½ cavalry.

Falkenhayn's strategic deception campaign extended to the Western Front and to his ally's forces as well. The gas attack by the German 4th Army at Ypres on 22 April was designed to disguise the transfer of troops east, which explains in part the lack of reserves for exploitation.[37] Falkenhayn was more ambitious with Habsburg forces. In addition to local attacks along the Austro-Hungarian front, Falkenhayn proposed the Austro-Hungarian 3rd Army retreat in order to draw Russian forces deeper into the Carpathians. Falkenhayn hoped that Russian reserves would then be withdrawn from the front at Gorlice and that more Russian forces might be trapped by the coming operation.[38] Conrad refused this request, though in the end, Austro-Hungarian forces hardly needed a special order to withdraw.[39]

11th Army's Operational Principles

On 27 April, Mackensen issued the 11th Army's "*Grundlegende Direktiven*" (Guiding Orders). In this document, Mackensen outlined the operational principles by which the 11th Army was to fight at Gorlice and for the remainder of the campaign in the east. This order owed much to Seeckt's experience with the limited offensives on the Western Front examined in Chapter 4.[40] Mackensen stressed that the units of the 11th Army must keep the momentum of their attacks going: "The 11th Army's attack must be carried forward with all speed, if it is to fulfil its assignment." The continuous momentum of the attack was to be accomplished by "...arraying the attacking infantry in deep columns [*Tiefengliederung*] and rapid following of the artillery fire." Mackensen did not foresee the army's attacking units making equal progress. His orders envisaged that those units ahead of others would support the general advance by continually moving forward and thus keep the Russians off balance.[41]

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[37] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, pp. 84-85; Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, p.99; Der Weltkrieg VII, pp. 38-49.

[38] Falkenhayn to Conrad, 22 April 1915, Nr.754OIb, BA/MA, W10/50689; Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.82; Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg II, p.306.

[39] Through the second half of April, Russian attacks pushed the Austro-Hungarian units slowly back all along the Carpathian line. Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg II, pp. 261-267.

[40] See Arthur Bullrich, "Die Schlacht bei Vailly am 30.X.1914 als Ausgangspunkt für die Erfolge bei Gorlice entscheidener neuer taktischer Grundsätze," unpublished manuscript in USNA, Seeckt Papers, M-132, Roll 20.

[41] AOK 11 "Grundlegende Direktiven für den Angriff," Nr.117 Ia, 27 April 1915, printed in [Hermann] von François, Gorlice 1915: Der Karpathendurchbruch und die Befreiung von Galizien (Leipzig: KF Koehler, 1922) pp. 34-35; excerpted in Kalm, op.cit., pp. 32-33.

The 11th Army also paid particularly close attention to artillery preparation before the battle and artillery support during the battle. Mackensen intended to use the artillery as much as possible to blast his way into the Russian position.[42] On 29 April, when Mackensen issued his attack orders to his command, he issued a special artillery order as well. For the first time in the war, the army-level artillery was commanded by one officer only, General Ziethen.[43] Under Ziethen's direction, the evening of 1-2 May was given over by Mackensen to "harassing fire" [*Störungsfeuer*], designed to prevent the enemy from strengthening their positions, from shifting reserves, and to keep the enemy troops off balance. Additionally, flat-trajectory guns were given the task of destroying Russian bunkers. This harassing fire was to slacken between 10:00 and 11:00pm and between 1:00 and 3:00am to allow pioneer patrols to cut through the Russian barbed wire and reconnaissance patrols time to assess the effect of the fire.[44]

Mackensen ordered that the full bombardment commence at 6:00am on 2 May. This "barrage" was to continue for 4 hours until the infantry assault at 10:00. Though he gave the individual corps freedom of action regarding targeting, Mackensen outlined the employment of the various types of guns. Heavy flat-trajectory guns were to be used in the last quarter of an hour before the infantry assault to hit potential concentration areas so that the Russian forward positions could not be reinforced. Howitzers were to bombard the enemy trenches and mortars were to target specific bunkers and wire entanglements. Additionally, the 11th Army's order stipulated that each corps was to assign a number of batteries to the front line. These batteries were to work closely with the attacking infantry to destroy enemy machine gun nests and other strong points. Mackensen stressed the importance of close infantry/artillery co-operation and that the artillery was to follow the advancing infantry as quickly as possible. Artillery observers were to advance with the infantry and co-operate closely with them to break down enemy resistance.[45]

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[42] August von Mackensen, Briefe und Aufzeichnungen (ed. Wolfgang Foerster) (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1938) p.141.

[43] Previously, army-level artillery was assigned to the individual corps, usually to the corps that bore the attack's *Schwerpunkt*, to be used as they saw fit. Bruce I. Gudmundsson, On Artillery (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993) p.55 and Berendt, op.cit., p. 43.

[44] Kalm, op.cit., pp. 35-36.

[45] Ibid. The best account in English of the infantry/artillery co-operation at Gorlice is Bruce I. Gudmundsson, Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918 (New York: Praeger, 1989) pp. 107-123. For an example of a corps' artillery order, see François, op.cit., pp. 39-42.

The Breakthrough at Gorlice

The 11th Army's attack on 2 May was a resounding success. Except for minor points, all units achieved their pre-established goals and captured large numbers of Russian prisoners. By the evening of 2 May, the Russian first position and the village of Gorlice were in German hands. Falkenhayn's insistence on strategic surprise paid off handsomely. Despite knowing that German troops had replaced Austro-Hungarian troops in the area of Gorlice, the commander of the Russian 3rd Army, General Radko-Dmitriev,[46] focused as he was on penetrating the Carpathians, made no preparations to counter a German offensive. At the point of the breakthrough, the 11th Army's 10 divisions were faced by 5 ½ second-rate Russian divisions. The 700-odd German guns were faced by 140 Russian light and 4 heavy artillery pieces.[47] OberOst's attacks against the Russian Northwest Front convinced its commander, General Michail Alexeyev, that a major attack was coming from the north. As a consequence, he refused to send reinforcement once the 11th Army attacked at Gorlice. Poor railroads meant that the Russians could not move reinforcements in quickly once the Germans had attacked.[48] Radko-Dmitriev's reserve, the III Caucasian Corps, could not reach the battlefield until 4 May, too late to restore the position, but not too late to be destroyed by Mackensen's relentless attacks.[49]

While Falkenhayn's strategic surprise ensured the isolation of the Russian 3rd Army, Mackensen's operational technique ensured victory on the battlefield. The heavy concentration of Austro-Hungarian-German guns and mortars pounded the Russian positions with little Russian reply. Radko-Dmitriev's short supply of guns were starved of ammunition and were no match for the accuracy or weight of the German guns.[50] Though pockets of resistance remained, German accounts are replete with stories of the German infantry walking into the Russian positions to be met with Russian soldiers

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[46] Radko-Dmitriev had been Bulgaria's diplomatic representative to Russia before the war. Upon the war's outbreak, he resigned this position to take a commission in the Tsar's service. For a synopsis of his varied career, see C.H. Baer, ed. Der Völkerkrieg Band 6. (Stuttgart: Julius Hoffmann, 1915) pp. 238-240.
[47] Stone, op.cit., p.130.
[48] N.N. Golovin, The Russian Army in World War I (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1969) p.186.
[49] Anon., "Erinnerungen an Galizien 1915," WuW H.3 Jg.1922, p.167. The author was a staff officer with the 11th Army during the campaign.
[50] Alfred Knox, With the Russian Army, 1914-1917 (Vol 1) (London: Hutchinson, 1921) pp.282-283. Cf. Stone, op.cit., pp. 144-164. Knox was the British military attaché to Russia during the war.

beaten senseless by the shelling.[51] On the first day of the offensive, the 11th Army took 17,000 Russian prisoners and 8 guns.[52]

During the night of 2 /3 May, Mackensen's artillery moved forward and his corps prepared for the next day's attack. Again, on 3 May, the 11th Army smashed through the Russian positions and took large numbers of prisoners. This pattern of rapid build up and attack, Mackensen's "pursuit" of the Russians, continued without pause until 10 May, and provided the model for the remainder of the campaign in the east in 1915. Ordered by the high command to hold at any cost, Ivanov's Southwest Front could do little but throw units in piecemeal to be destroyed. Outflanked by the advancing Germans and pressured by the Austro-Hungarians in the Carpathians, on the 10th, he was finally given permission to withdraw to the San River. By this time, the Russian 3rd Army had lost 140,000 prisoners and 200 guns to the Germans. At the beginning of May, the Russian 3rd Army had consisted of close to 200,000 men. A further 50,000 replacements had been received by 10 May. Only 40,000 reached the new defensive position on the San.[53]

By 9 May, Falkenhayn was able to declare, "the German troops under *Generaloberst* von Mackensen have fulfilled their mission..."[54] A grateful Kaiser Wilhelm shifted his headquarters to Schloss Pless in Silesia and showered honors upon his men after celebrating with his customary bottle of *Sekt*: Falkenhayn received the Order of the Schwarzer Adler; Mackensen and Seeckt, as well as Archduke Friedrich and Conrad, received the Pour le Mérite; and Tappen was awarded the Ritterkreuz of the House of Hohenzollern.[55] Mackensen became a hero overnight and was named by the press as the "master of the breakthrough."(The irony, however, of Schlieffen's onetime adjutant now being called the "master of the breakthrough" was not lost on some contemporaries.)[56]

Indeed, Mackensen's operational principles proved to be an effective approach to the conditions of the World War I battlefield. Unlike the pre-war emphasis on flank attacks and envelopments, Mackensen relied instead on breaking through a prepared enemy position with heavy artillery. This process inflicted severe casualties upon the

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[51] Kalm, op.cit., pp. 50-51; Trach, op.cit., pp. 39-52; François, op.cit., pp. 50-51.
[52] François, op.cit., p.63.
[53] Stone, op.cit., p.139.
[54] Falkenhayn to Conrad, 9 May 1915, Nr.1054r, BA/MA, W10/51380.
[55] Plessen, "Tagebuch," 12 May 1915; Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 12 May 1915; Treutler to Bethmann Hollweg, 12 May 1915, PRO, GFM 34/2584 (Weltkrieg geh. Bd.15).

enemy. Given the reliance on heavy artillery, however, the 11th Army's advance was slow and the Russians were able to withdraw to positions prepared in the rear. Mackensen's "pursuit" of the Russians consisted of repeated breakthrough operations, which cost the Russians dearly. This approach stood in contrast to that of OberOst, who continued to emphasize the pre-war approach of large-scale envelopments.

Exploitation and Strategic Priorities

Despite the success of the breakthrough, as Wilhelm Groener noted on 15 May, it was time for the "second act" which would turn the tactical success into an "operational" victory.[57] Falkenhayn seemed in agreement with Groener despite declaring Mackensen's mission accomplished. The original mission of relieving military pressure on Austria-Hungary had been accomplished. Falkenhayn now turned his sights on what was perhaps on his mind since intervening in the east – ensuring that Austria-Hungary was safe from future Russian threats.[58] Falkenhayn and Conrad agreed on 13 May that Mackensen's next task was to reach the San River and retake the fortress of Przemysl – a defensive line which could be held quite easily by Austro-Hungarian forces.[59]

The strategic situation, however, militated against a rapid decision on future goals and against a rapid exploitation of the 11th Army's success. To the south, the Austro-Hungarian 7th Army had been attacked on 9 May and suffered serious losses to the Russian 9th Army.[60] Conrad wanted to shift troops south to Bukowina to reinforce his 7th Army. Accordingly, he requested Falkenhayn to transfer more troops from the west to cover the withdrawal of two Austro-Hungarian divisions from Galicia.[61] Falkenhayn replied that due to the "expected large English-French offensive southwest of Lille" no further German troops could be spared for the east. This long-anticipated Anglo-French offensive began on 9 May and broke with unexpected ferocity. For the time being, Falkenhayn felt unable to shift reserves from the west to the east. He questioned,

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[56] Theo Schwarzmüller, Zwischen Kaiser und "Führer": Generalfeldmarschall August von Mackensen (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996) p.108.
[57] Diary entry for 15 May 1915, in Groener, op.cit., p.232.
[58] After the war Falkenhayn wrote that his original aims were "...the permanent crippling of Russia's offensive power...but in the first place the freeing of the allies' front from the pressure upon it." Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.80. The surviving evidence indicates that this wider goal only came about after the success of the initial breakthrough.
[59] Der Weltkrieg VII, p.426; Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg II, p.372.
[60] Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg II, pp. 357-361.
[61] Conrad to Falkenhayn, 9 May 1915, Nr.9991, BA/MA, W10/51380.

however, Conrad's desire to send troops to Bukowina. He believed that "the decision lies in West Galicia" and that upon its success rested the fate of the remainder of the Austro-Hungarian Army.[62]

In addition to the Russian offensive in Bukowina and the Anglo-French attack in the west, the Central Powers expected Italy to declare war any day. Falkenhayn and Conrad were at loggerheads concerning how the Central Powers should react to this Italian move and this impasse dominated their discussions for most of mid-May.[63] Conrad was obsessed by the desire to punish the Central Powers' onetime ally and suggested that Germany and Austria-Hungary each send 10 divisions to the coming Italian front.[64] Despite the fact that the Habsburg army was already over stretched, Conrad insisted forcefully that the Central Powers wage war against Italy offensively.

Falkenhayn favored remaining on the defensive against Italy. Instead, he raised again the idea of launching an offensive against Serbia designed to knock Serbia out of the war once and for all and to open communications with a beleaguered Turkey.[65] However, he remained convinced that before any other undertaking, Austria-Hungary must be made safe from any future Russian attack. Falkenhayn held that the Austro-Hungarian-German forces must first deal the Russians a powerful blow, which would push them behind the San and reduce their offensive capability.[66] He did not believe this had been achieved by late May and, consequently, the allied forces should remain focused on Galicia until their goals had been achieved. Conrad finally agreed to Falkenhayn's proposals, though he remained inclined to shut down operations in Galicia and to punish the Italians.[67]

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[62] Falkenhayn to Conrad, 10 May 1915, Nr.1072r, BA/MA, W10/50689; Der Weltkrieg Bd VIII: Die Operationen des Jahres 1915: Die Ereignisse im Westen im Frühjahr und Sommer, im Osten vom Frühjahr bis zum Jahresschluß (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1932) pp. 55-78

[63] For an account of the acrimonious exchange between Conrad and Falkenhayn see, Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, pp. 105-107. Conrad's obsession with Italy was noted by Karl Graf von Kageneck, the German military attaché to Austria-Hungary. Kageneck to Reichsarchiv, 11 August 1931, BA/MA, W10/51408.

[64] Conrad to Falkenhayn, 14 May 1915, Op.Nr.10176, BA/MA, W10/50689.

[65] "Vorschlag General v. Falkenhayn für die Führung der Operation der Verbündeten im Fall des sofortigen Eintritts Italiens in den Krieg," 18 May 1915, BA/MA, W10/50683.

[66] Falkenhayn to Conrad, 16 May 1915, Nr.1224r, BA/MA, W10/50689 and "Bemerkungen General v. Falkenhayns zur Erwiderung General Conrads," 17 May 1915, BA/MA, W10/50683. Falkenhayn envisioned the creation of a strong defensive position based on the line of the major rivers in the region. He hoped this could be held with 30 divisions, thus freeing some 25 divisions for use elsewhere.

[67] Conrad to Falkenhayn, "Erwiderung auf die Denkschrift des Chefs des Generalstabes des deutschen Feldheeres Nr.1224r," 17 May 1915, Nr.10285, BA/MA, W10/50683.

In the end, the two general staff chiefs were overtaken by events. By 23 May, when Italy declared war against Austria-Hungary (though not against Germany), Mackensen's offensive in Galicia had begun to lose steam. Although Mackensen had been on ordered on 13 May to throw the Russians behind the San and to retake Przemysl, he was forced to postpone the attack until 17 May. The 11th Army needed time to bring up sufficient supplies to renew the offensive, and the Austro-Hungarian armies flanking the predominantly German 11th Army had difficulty getting into position for the attack.[68] It was not until 25 May that the 11th Army had secured the San River line and had established bridgeheads across the river. The 3rd Austro-Hungarian Army on the 11th Army's southern flank had made little progress in re-taking the fortress of Przemysl, and Mackensen was forced to divert units of the 11th Army to aid the Austro-Hungarians, while the remainder of his troops prepared defensive positions along the San. On 3 June, Przemysl was finally retaken by the 11th Bavarian Division.[69]

Through late May, the Russians shifted more and more reserves to the Galician front. By 20 May, German intelligence had already discovered in Galicia Russian units originally intended for an offensive against Turkey (the so-called "Odessa Army"). Each day brought the knowledge of more of these units.[70] Although these newly introduced forces were not rated highly by German intelligence, they achieved local successes, especially against Austro-Hungarian forces, and for some time, the Central Powers' position on the San was insecure.[71]

Reality forced Falkenhayn and Conrad to lay aside their strategic differences and agree upon a course of action. To deal with the Italian question, a specially formed German unit, the *Alpenkorps*, was transported to the Italian Front and three newly formed German divisions (101,103, and 105) were sent to southern Austria-Hungary (Syrmia) to replace the five Austro-Hungarian divisions sent to the Italian Front.[72] The two agreed to stand on the defensive against Italy for the time being. To reinvigorate the slowed

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[68] Der Weltkrieg VIII, p.141 and [Friedrich]von Mantey, "In welchem Masse vermögen Verkehrsmittel den Ansatz und Verlauf militärischer Operation zu beeinflussen?," WuW Jg.1939. pp. 37-51.
[69] François, op.cit., pp.145-180. Mackensen "laid" the recaptured fortress at Kaiser Franz Joseph's feet. ("Ich bitte Seiner k.u.k. apostolischen Majestät zu melden, daß die 11.Armee Przemysl Allerhöchstihm zu Füßen legt.") Quoted in Seeckt, op.cit., p.144; Herwig, op.cit., p.142.
[70] Nachrichtenabteilung Ost, "Vortragsnotizen," 20-29 May 1915, BA/MA, W10/51388.
[71] Der Weltkrieg VIII, pp. 217-220; Oesterreich Ungarns Letzter Krieg II, pp. 383-386; Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, p.108.
[72] Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, pp. 106-107; Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, pp. 94-95. The three German divisions in south Austria-Hungary had the task of defending against a possible Rumanian invasion and to guard against a possible problem with the south Slavs of this area of the Habsburg Empire.

offensive in Galicia, OHL ordered additional German forces to the region: two and a half divisions were taken from the west, two divisions from OberOst, and two of the divisions destined for Syrmia were assigned to Mackensen's command.[73]

On 3 June, Mackensen received his new instructions concerning the conduct of the campaign. A reshuffling of forces took place, putting German units in the Austro-Hungarian 3rd and 4th Armies to strengthen their offensive power. Mackensen assumed command of these Austro-Hungarian armies in addition to his own 11th Army, that he might have "the strength to conduct an offensive against the Russian forces east of the San..."[74] AOK ordered *Heeresgruppe Mackensen* to "strike decisively" the enemy before him and to take the city of Lemberg.[75] Falkenhayn hoped that the capture of Lemberg, the city which upon its capture in 1914 the Tsar proclaimed would always remain Russian, would "...create a disastrous impression for the Russians throughout the whole east."[76]

Before Mackensen could go over to the offensive, however, preparations had to be made, once again causing delay. The Austro-Hungarian units under his command had to move into suitable position and supplies had to be accumulated. Like the earlier offensives of the campaign, the Central Powers attacked with great amounts of artillery, designed to crush Russian positions and stun the defenders. The build up of the needed supplies was delayed by the poor road and rail network of Galicia. While these preparations were progressing, the Russians counter-attacked the Austro-Hungarian 3rd Army, causing delay in their preparations. Additionally, the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army had difficulty reaching its designated position.[77] As a result, *Heeresgruppe Mackensen* could not begin its offensive until 12 June.

Repeating the formula perfected in the previous month's fighting, *Heeresgruppe Mackensen* began a breakthrough operation on 12 June. Between 13 June and 22 June, they smashed through two Russian defensive positions as they had at Gorlice. As the powerful German 11th Army pierced the Russian positions, it "pulled" its neighbouring units along through the breach. A small breakthrough quickly became a rout. By 22 June,

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[73] Der Weltkrieg VIII, p.202.
[74] "Direktiven für die Fortsetzung der Operationen in Galizien," 4 June 1915, AOK Nr.11160, BA/MA, W10/51388; Mackensen, op.cit., p.170.
[75] Der Weltkrieg VIII, p.203.
[76] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.101.
[77] Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg II, pp. 451-452; 11th Army to OHL, 3 June 1915, Ia Nr.2017, BA/MA, W10/51388. Mackensen complained of the weakness of the Austro-Hungarian forces and requested OHL pressure the AOK to reinforce the Austro-Hungarian 3rd and 4th Armies.

Heeresgruppe Mackensen had captured Lemberg.[78] With Lemberg's fall came the end of the first phase of operations in the east and the end of one of the war's most successful campaigns. The Central Powers had advanced over 300 kilometers since 1 May and had relentlessly ground down the Russian army. From 1 May until 22 June, the 11th Army alone captured over 250,000 prisoners, 225 of the Russian's precious guns, and over 600 machineguns. It had cost the 11th Army 87,000 casualties, 12,000 of whom were dead.[79] In his memoirs, Falkenhayn summed up what he saw as the outcome of his reluctant eastern venture up to 22 June:

> The threat to Hungary had been completely removed; Austria-Hungary was given the possibility of sending sufficient forces to the Italian front; Turkey was relieved from the danger of an attack upon the Bosphorus by the Russian Odessa Army; these and the pacification of Rumania and the resumption of connections with Bulgaria were the immediate and highly valuable consequences.[80]

Additionally, the operational principles employed by the German armies proved their worth. The combination of heavy artillery and close infantry/artillery co-operation succeeded in breaking through Russian positions time after time. No Russian trench position seemed to be able to withstand the onslaught. Although the Russians were normally able to withdraw before they could be encircled and destroyed by the advancing Germans, the process of the breakthrough caused them serious losses. German tactics caused a slow but steady haemorrhaging of the Russian Army, from which Falkenhayn hoped it would never recover.

A Separate Peace with Russia?

After the fall of Lemberg, it seemed the role of the powerful German assault group was at an end, and Falkenhayn began making plans to transport units back to the west. There they would be useful in defending against the powerful Entente attacks and form the nucleus of an army that would attack the Western Allies.[81] In the west, the Entente again prepared for an offensive, and the OHL reckoned on an inferiority of 600 battalions.[82] The re-introduction of forces from the east seemed necessary to shore up the

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[78] The fall of Lemberg was seen by most as much more important politically than militarily. See Plessen, "Tagebuch," 22 June 1915. Mackensen earned his field marshal's baton for his success.
[79] Der Weltkrieg VIII, pp. 236-237.
[80] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.104.
[81] Groener, op.cit., p. 239; Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 18 June 1915.
[82] Falkenhayn to OberOst, 11 June 1915, Nr.2398r, BA/MA, W10/51388.

threatened front. Additionally, Falkenhayn conceived of plans for the "cleansing" of French forces from the small portion of German territory they occupied. The conduct of the operations in the east were again to fall prey to the requirements of other fronts.[83]

Falkenhayn soon altered his opinion, however. The Entente superiority in the west militated against Falkenhayn's planned small offensive in Alsace and the German forces seemed able to hold their own defensively against the Entente attacks. Additionally, despite the notable successes in Galicia, Falkenhayn, and many authorities of the Central Powers, came to believe that not enough had yet been achieved in the east.[84] As the campaign in the east progressed, the "permanent crippling" of Russian offensive power became an important goal of the OHL. The performance of Russian troops during the offensive from mid-May until 22 June had shown that the Russian army had been considerably weakened.[85] However, Falkenhayn did not believe that the Russian military had yet been "permanently crippled." He determined to keep the pressure on Russia through the summer to destroy what he believed to be the last of Russia's reserves.

In addition to wearing down Russia's army, Falkenhayn came to believe that Russia could be pressured into coming to terms with the Central Powers. As Chapter 4 has shown, shortly after the failure of the German campaign in 1914, Falkenhayn concluded that Germany could not win a long war against all the Entente powers, and that Germany should make strenuous efforts to detach Russia or France from the coalition. As Falkenhayn believed that between Germany and Russia there existed no real difference of interests, at least none necessitating war, he was again convinced that Russia could be brought to the peace table.[86]

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[83] Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, pp. 113-114. Falkenhayn's idea of "cleansing" Alsace of French troops drew great attention from the Reichsarchiv after the war, and the Reichsarchiv seemed determined to prove that Falkenhayn intended this operation to be a "war deciding" offensive. Tappen indicated it was merely a secondary concern. Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 16 June 1932, BA/MA, N56/5. Other evidence supports Tappen. See Heymann to Reichsarchiv, 16 November 1932, BA/MA, W10/51352 (Heymann was involved in the operation's planning); Groener, op.cit., p.249.

[84] Groener, op.cit., pp. 239-240; Tappen later wrote, "If the Russian army was destroyed, then a peace with Russia could be made and a decisive offensive in the west...could be launched." Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 16 June 1932, BA/MA, N56/5.

[85] Tappen wrote, "The worth of the Russian troops had fallen considerably. Their replacements, especially officer replacements, were barely trained and lacked weapons." Kriegserinnerungen, p.113.

[86] Holger Afflerbach, Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1996) p.295.

Returning again to Moltke the Elder's idea that military success should serve as the springboard for a negotiated peace,[87] the General Staff Chief felt that by the summer of 1915 the time was right to approach Russia with a German offer of a separate peace. As early as 3 June, he proposed Russia be offered an armistice in view of the military setbacks recently inflicted.[88] Bethmann, once again, held the moment to be inappropriate. After the fall of Lemberg, Falkenhayn renewed his drive for a separate peace, and operations were directed towards this goal. He intended further operations to demonstrate to the Russians that they could never defeat the Central Powers. The Russian army was to be destroyed and Russian Poland was to be conquered. Falkenhayn knew how important Poland was to Russia and he intended to use this territory as a bargaining chip in negotiations with his enemy.[89]

Conrad agreed with Falkenhayn's goals. On 21 July, in the midst of another highly successful campaign, he sent Falkenhayn a memorandum suggesting the time was right to offer Russia peace terms. He proposed that Russia be offered special rights in the Dardanelles and perhaps even an alliance with the Central Powers. A peace with Russia, Conrad declared, would allow the transfer of sufficient forces to other theaters to decide the war. He stressed that Germany and Austria-Hungary should make all efforts to construct a "golden bridge" to Russia. Falkenhayn answered the next day, declaring that he had advised the German government along similar lines for some time and that he had forwarded Conrad's memorandum to Bethmann.[90]

Falkenhayn and Conrad's pressure for a separate peace met with no success, however. Though the *Auswärtiges Amt* made some overtures to the Russians through a Danish intermediary, the Russians were unwilling to discuss peace terms, declaring they would stand by the Entente pledge of 5 September 1914 that no member would conclude a separate peace. The Chancellor felt that a publication of definitive terms, as Falkenhayn wanted, would be seen as a sign of German weakness by the Entente and the neutrals. Bethmann also realized that as long as there remained the prospect of the Entente opening the Dardenelles, Russia would have no reason for responding to German offers.

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[87] See Chapter 1.
[88] Gerhard Ritter, The Sword and the Sceptre Vol. 3: The Tragedy of Statesmanship – Bethmann-Hollweg as War Chancellor (1914-1917) (London: Allen Lane, 1972) p.68. Falkenhayn's desire for a moderate peace with Russia was shared by Plessen as well. "We must come to peace with Russia. Therefore, no great annexations." Plessen, "Tagebuch," 10 July 1915.
[89] Afflerbach, op.cit., p.300.
[90] Ibid., pp. 300-301.

He suggested instead that, in order to keep the Russians well-disposed to a peace offer, Falkenhayn should "conduct the war against Russia with 'benevolence' [*wohlwollend*]." As part of his "benevolent" conduct of the campaign, Falkenhayn ordered that no public celebrations of the capture of Warsaw were to be held.[91] By early August, however, the drive for a separate peace was slowing down and no amount of German military success seemed to be able to restart the process.[92]

The Conquest of Russian Poland

By July 1915, Russian Poland formed a great salient in the Central Powers' line; its northern flank being formed by East Prussia and its southern by the recently re-conquered Austrian Galicia. The Russians defended this portion of the front with formidable fortresses and with six armies. The Russians hoped that these powerful fortresses, upon which so much money had been spent before the war, would act as brakes on the coming German attack. Novogeogievsk, at the confluence of the Weichsel and Narev Rivers, covered the approach to Warsaw with 1,680 guns and over a million rounds of ammunition. All told, Novogeogievsk, together with Ivanogorod, Dvinsk, Osoweic, Grodno, and Kovno, protected the frontiers of Russian Poland with a total of 5,200 old and 4,030 modern artillery pieces.[93] The two Russian fronts (the Northwest Front under Alexeyev and the Southwest Front under Ivanov) were arrayed in the salient placed under the command of Alexeyev at the beginning of the month. The two fronts defended the 1,300 km salient with six armies (including the armies so roughly handled by Mackensen in May), or 80 divisions, two-thirds of the whole Russian army.[94]

Falkenhayn, intent on not becoming too deeply engaged in what he regarded as a fruitless attack deep in Russia, intended to attack with a shallow envelopment and to cripple the Russian army in the process.[95] The General Staff Chief rejected the calls of OberOst and Conrad for a grand envelopment from Prussia in the north and Austrian Galicia in the south, aimed at encircling all the Russian forces in the Polish salient. Given the experience of the past months, he felt that the Russians would simply retreat faster

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[91] Wild von Hohenborn to his wife, 24 June 1915, BA/MA, N44/3. Wild believed that Falkenhayn must have misunderstood Bethmann. Herwig, op.cit., p.145

[92] For an overview of the attempts at peace in the east in 1915, see L.L. Farrar, Divide and Conquer: German Efforts To Conclude a Separate Peace, 1914-1918 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) pp. 13-34; Fischer, op.cit., pp.184-214; and Ritter, op.cit., pp. 66-74.

[93] Stone, op.cit., pp. 174-175.

[94] Der Weltkrieg VIII, p.445.

than the arms of the German envelopment could advance. Instead, he decided to rely upon the operational techniques perfected by Mackensen. The Russian army would be broken up in a series of step-by-step offensives, which relied on the effect of artillery.[96]

Accordingly, on 13 July, the Central Powers began attacking all along their line, in what was to be the largest German operation since the invasion of France. From the north, Gallwitz' *Armeeabteilung* advanced against the Russian 1st and 12th Armies on the Narev River and, with the German 9th Army attacking from the south, quickly threatened Warsaw. *Armeeabteilung Woyrsch*, composed mainly of *Landwehr* units, attacked in the center to prevent the Russians from reinforcing the salient's flanks. In the south, *Heeresgruppe Mackensen* (now the 11th Army, the 4th Austro-Hungarian Army, the 1st Austro-Hungarian Army, and the newly formed *Bugarmee*) received the order to break through the Russian position along the Weichsel and Bug Rivers and advance northerly towards Brest-Litovsk to break Warsaw's lines of communication.[97] All told, nine German and Austro-Hungarian armies attacked the Russian salient.

Again, the Central Powers attacked with great material superiority, overwhelming Russian resistance with heavy artillery. (Gallwitz attacked on 13 July with 500 guns and 400,000 rounds of ammunition, a greater intensity of fire than at Gorlice.[98]) One Russian corps commander wrote of the experience,

> The Germans plough up the battlefields with a hail of metal and level our trenches and fortifications, the fire often burying the defenders of the trenches in them. The Germans expend metal, we expend life.[99]

As at Gorlice, the Russian artillery was unable to reply, being hopelessly out gunned and out classed, and the attacking infantry was often able to walk into battered Russian positions unopposed. Russian replacements were hurried into battle, some only having time for 2 or 3 weeks of training.[100]

Following the formula perfected in the previous months, the Central Powers advanced remorselessly, if slowly. The Russian were unable to construct defensive

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[95] Plessen, "Tagebuch," 28 June 1915.
[96] For an overview of the bitter debate between Falkenhayn, OberOst, and Conrad see, Ludwig Rüdt von Collenburg, "Die Oberste Heeresleitung und der Oberbefehlshaber Ost im Sommerfeldzug 1915," WuW Jg.1932 pp. 281-296; and Franz Uhle-Wettler, Erich Ludendorff in seiner Zeit (Berg: Kurt Vowinckel-Verlag, 1995) pp. 180-187.
[97] Mackensen, op.cit., p.189.
[98] Der Weltkrieg VIII, p.284. See also Appendix 1.
[99] General Zuev (commander of the Russian XXIX Corps), quoted in Golovin, op.cit., p.227.

positions strong enough to contain the formidable striking power of the Germans, and repeatedly the German armies broke through hastily constructed Russian positions.[101] The Russian high command faced the unenviable decision of retreating from Poland completely or of losing much of their army. Finally, on 22 July, General Alexeyev ordered a general retreat, which continued until September.[102] Everywhere important Russian positions fell to the Central Powers: Warsaw and Ivanogorod were taken on 4 August, Kovno was captured on 18 August, Novogeorgievsk fell on 19 August, Osoweic on 22 August, Brest-Litovsk on 26 August.

By September 1915, the Central Powers had driven the Russians from Poland. Additionally, OberOst's renewed offensive to the north had advanced deeper into Courland and into Russia itself, capturing the fortress of Kovno and Vilna and threatening Riga. The advance to Vilna cut the only Russian north-south railway, effectively cutting the Russian front in two.[103] The human cost to the Russians was just as great. From the beginning of May until the end of the year, the Russians had lost over 2.2 million men, including over 1 million prisoners. In January 1916, German intelligence reckoned that Russian divisions only numbered 11,000 men, most of whom would be poorly trained, poorly equipped, and poorly led.[104]

By 31 August planning had begun on defensive positions along the newly captured ground, and the operations in Poland began to wind down.[105] The massive losses inflicted on the Russian army and its poor combat performance in the campaign convinced both Falkenhayn and Conrad that the Russian army was incapable of offensive action for the foreseeable future.[106] Though Russia had not been forced into a separate peace, the other more immediate goal of the Central Powers had been achieved. The Central Powers possessed, by early September, a seemingly defensible frontier. The

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[100] Golovin, op.cit., 227. For Gallwitz' breakthrough see, Gustav Meyer, Der Durchbruch am Narew (Juli-August 1915) (Der große Krieg in Einzeldarstellungen Heft 27/28) (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1919).
[101] See Pehlmann, Die Kämpfe der Bug-Armee (Der große Krieg in Einzeldarstellungen Heft 26) (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1918).
[102] Stone, op.cit., p.181; Golovin, op.cit., p.224.
[103] Golovin, op.cit., p.188.
[104] Der Weltkrieg VIII, pp. 596-597. In October 1915, the British military attaché estimated the Russians at 5,000 men per division. PRO, WO 106/1067, Report of Lt.Col. A. Knox, 12 October 1915.
[105] Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 31 August 1915.
[106] Reports even came in to OHL that Russian units were using women and children in the front line. Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 29 August 1915. See also Plessen, "Tagebuch," 26 August 1915. In January 1916, Falkenhayn informed Bethmann that the Russian army was incapable of any "large-scale offensives" for the immediate future. Bethmann, diary entry for 7 January 1916, quoted in Karl-Heinz Janßen, Der Kanzler und der General (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1967) p.288.

offensive power of the Russian army had been broken and German forces could now be used elsewhere without fear of an Austro-Hungarian collapse.

Though small German and Austro-Hungarian offensives continued until the end of the year, the great campaign was over by early September.[107] On 6 September, the Bulgarians finally agreed to a military convention with the Central Powers and Falkenhayn's long-planned Serbian expedition could go ahead. Mackensen was again chosen to spearhead this combined Austro-Hungarian-Bulgarian-German invasion scheduled to begin in early October. Additionally, the expected Anglo-French offensive in the west claimed more troops, and Falkenhayn began shifting troops west in anticipation of this attack and for a future German offensive.[108] Conrad was finally free to deploy his troops against his arch-enemy, Italy.

Conclusion

By the end of 1915, the Central Powers stood at the height of their success. The campaigns begun in May 1915 had resulted in the conquest of Russian Poland, the weakening of the Russian army, and the destruction and occupation of Serbia. German and Austro-Hungarian victories had persuaded Bulgaria to enter into alliance with the Central Powers and Rumania at least to remain neutral. The defeat of Serbia opened secure land communications with Turkey and ensured that supplies could flow freely to aid against further Entente attacks. With Turkey secure, no Entente supplies would reach the strickened Russia through the Dardanelles. To the strategic leaders of Germany and Austria-Hungary, Falkenhayn and Conrad, their backs seemed protected, allowing them to entertain the thought of offensives elsewhere.

Despite these notable successes, Falkenhayn's conduct of the campaigns in the east in 1915 was highly criticised by historians after the war. Liddell Hart wrote that Falkenhayn's strategy in 1915 lacked decisiveness, and that "Falkenhayn's cautious strategy was to prove the most hazardous in the long run, and indeed pave the way for Germany's bankruptcy."[109] In a discussion about conclusions to draw from the 1915 eastern campaigns, the writers of the German official history came to a similar

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[107] Der Weltkrieg VIII, pp. 456-533; Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg Bd III: Kriegsjahr 1915 (Zweiter Teil) (Vienna: Verlag der Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen, 1932), pp. 523-559.
[108] Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 5 September 1915; Groener, op.cit., p.249.
[109] B.H. Liddell Hart, The Real War 1914-1918 (London: Faber & Faber, 1930) p.150.

conclusion. They believed that Falkenhayn should have withdrawn forces from the Western Front sufficient to defeat Russia "decisively" enough to dictate peace terms, even if this meant a general withdrawal to shorten German positions in France. The consensus of opinion amongst the Reichsarchiv writers was that Falkenhayn lacked the strategic vision and the moral strength necessary to conduct the operations to a decisive end. The director of the *Historische Abteilung* of the Reichsarchiv, Hans von Haeften, concluded that "...Falkenhayn had led us to catastrophe."[110]

Central to this criticism was Falkenhayn's decision to conduct a step-by-step offensive with limited goals in the east. This strategy was partly forced on Falkenhayn by the relative weakness of the Germans on the Western Front and the Central Powers' unstable diplomatic position. More than that, however, this strategy, as well as the strategy he would follow in the west, reflected what Falkenhayn believed to be Germany's material weakness.[111] As we have seen in Chapter 4, Falkenhayn believed that Germany did not have the strength, even with a shortening of the front in the west, to defeat Russia or either of her other enemies decisively. [112] Convinced that "decisive" operations were not possible under the current conditions, he focused instead on what he believed to be achievable goals and tailored his strategy accordingly.

Although after the war he would be criticised for scattering his forces in diversionary operations, his critics missed that these secondary operations were central components of Falkenhayn's strategy. To Falkenhayn, one goal remained constant throughout the operations in the east in 1915 – the securing of the Eastern Front from Russian threat through the destruction of the enemy's offensive power. To achieve this, Falkenhayn had to strike a careful balance between operations central to destroying the Russian army and side operations (like the conquering of the Russian Baltic region) which drained away German strength. These secondary operations, however, played an

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[110] "Protokoll über die Besprechung bei Herrn General von Haeften am 6.Dezember 1930," BA/MA, W10/51408. Present were the writers of volume 8 of Der Weltkrieg, Wolfgang Foerster, Theobald von Schäfer, Wilhelm Solger, Günther Frantz, and Otto Klemp. It must be remembered that Haeften was a bitter opponent of Falkenhayn during the war and played a prominent role in the intrigues against him. (See Guth, op.cit., passim.) Indeed, much of the criticism levelled against Falkenhayn after the war was really a continuation of the acrimonious strategic debate and personal conflicts that went on during the war between Falkenhayn and Ludendorff and his followers.

[111] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, pp. 88-90; Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 16 June 1932, BA/MA, N56/5; Zwehl, op.cit., 139.

[112] In June 1915, Falkenhayn had examined this possibility, and the reporting officer, *Generalmajor* von Mertens, the general of engineers for the 10th Army, rejected it as impractical. Mewes to Reichsarchiv, 15 August and 8 September 1931, BA/MA, W10/51408. See Chapter 6 for a full discussion.

important role in Falkenhayn's strategy. They functioned as diversions, which kept the enemy guessing about the location of the real attack, and served to siphon off enemy reserves away from the main attack.

These diversionary attacks were essential in securing the necessary strategic surprise in early May when Mackensen's 11th Army attacked at Gorlice. The Russians, focused as they were on their own operations in the Carpathians, were unprepared for the German assault and had few reserves handy. The scarce Russian reserves were partially diverted by the German attack in the Courland, which convinced the commander of the Northwest Front that strong attacks would fall there rather than on the Southwest Front. Consequently, he refused to dispatch the necessary reinforcement. For a limited operation, the diversion in Courland reaped disproportionate results.

This concept of strategic surprise was considered by Falkenhayn to be essential to the success of the operations in the east. While this idea was by no means new in 1915, war in the west had shown how crucial it was to successful operations. Falkenhayn had learned by 1915 that an enemy, in strongly constructed positions, could easily bring up enough reserves to counter almost any attack if given enough warning. Consequently, in the eastern campaigns of 1915, the OHL went to elaborate lengths to hide its intentions from the enemy for as long as possible. This included, in addition to wide-ranging diversionary attacks, going so far as to keep the Austro-Hungarian AOK in the dark regarding German plans.

Another tool crucial to Falkenhayn's planned destruction of the Russian army was the liberal use of heavy artillery. Artillery provided the manpower-deficient but materially rich Germans with a cost-effective means for fighting the manpower-rich but materially deficient Russian army. The German advantage stemmed not just from a superiority in number of guns but also from superior technique. By 1915, the German army had made great tactical and technical developments in infantry/artillery co-operation. The Russians suffered horribly under the accurate German fire through the entire offensive, and German infantry was often called upon merely to mop up shattered Russian forces. In short, Falkenhayn's policy matched German strengths with Russian weaknesses, summed up succinctly by the commander of the Russian IXX Corps, General Zuev, "the Germans expend metal, we expend life."[113]

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[113] Quoted in Golovin, op.cit., p.227

Between May and September 1915, Falkenhayn's strategy had succeeded in inflicting over 2 million casualties upon the Russians – the greatest number of casualties inflicted on an enemy in any campaign until that time.[114] (By contrast, though the figures are still highly disputed, in the course of the Battle of the Somme in 1916, the British suffered 420,000 casualties, the French 200,000 and the Germans 465,000 or 1,085,000 all told.[115]) Worse, these casualties encompassed the trained manpower and, in German eyes more importantly, the trained and experienced officers essential for modern warfare. It is understandable that Falkenhayn (and Conrad) believed the Russian army incapable of any offensive action for the foreseeable future.

In part, the very success of Falkenhayn's strategy in the east in 1915 led to the criticisms of future historians. Falkenhayn's success had led to a diminution of the Hindenburg/Ludendorff star. As Wilhelm Groener noted in his diary after a conversation with the Kaiser in the summer of 1915: "His trust in Falkenhayn is unshaken and unshakeable. He [the Kaiser] believes in him [Falkenhayn], while he has no close connection with the personalities of the east [Hindenburg and Ludendorff]."[116] Hans von Haeften, and many other German officers, found Falkenhayn's methods of warfare repellent. In the summer of 1915, they longed for a return to grand envelopments, as Ludendorff advocated. Their post-war critique reflected their wartime opinions. Falkenhayn's choice of strategy, however, has been seconded by a more recent (and probably more objective) researcher than Liddell Hart or the Reichsarchiv, Norman Stone:

> Falkenhayn was a modern general, and had a more sensible view of the war than Ludendorff or Conrad. He knew that great manoeuvres, as in past wars, could not fit the present circumstances. The war in the East proved Falkenhayn to be right. What shook *Stavka* was not the ostensibly brilliant manoeuvring of Ludendorff – and certainly not that of Conrad – but the huge losses they suffered in set-piece soldiers' battles such as Gorlice, or Mackensen's bludgeoning before Lublin. They were much more costly, even than Tannenberg.[117]

One aspect of Falkenhayn's strategy in 1915, however, did not fare so well – that of forcing Russia into agreeing to a separate peace. Falkenhayn's idea of pummelling the Russians to the negotiating table came to no end. This was in part because the concept

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[114] Der Weltkrieg VIII, pp. 596-597; Golovin, op.cit., p.222. It is difficult to give an accurate count of Russian losses, as they were so high in 1915 that the Russians lost track themselves.
[115] Herwig, op.cit., p.204.
[116] Groener, op.cit., 245.

relied upon two factors out of Falkenhayn's control – the *Auswärtiges Amt* and Russia's resolve. Falkenhayn could not force Bethmann into negotiations with the Russians and he clearly underestimated Russian will. In the end, he had to settle for a goal he could achieve – the crushing of Russian military power. Russia was not taken from the war, as Falkenhayn had desired since November 1914, but her offensive capability was seemingly crippled.

At the end of 1915, German successes in the east allowed Falkenhayn to concentrate on what was to him the decisive theater of combat, the Western Front. He took with him important lessons from the campaign in the east, which would see application in his strategy for defeating the Western Allies. Falkenhayn's insistence on strategic surprise was crucial to success in Poland. He would attempt to use it again in France. Diversionary attacks had been successful in deceiving the Russian command and in keeping large enemy forces tied up elsewhere. Falkenhayn would attempt this again in the west. Powerful artillery combined with close infantry/artillery co-operation had played a central role breaking through and destroying many Russian units, causing grievous harm to the capability of the Russian army. Artillery would play an even more crucial role in his campaign against the western allies. At Verdun the Germans would use more artillery, better supplied with ammunition and with improved infantry/artillery tactics. And last, Falkenhayn would again return to the idea of forcing one enemy into a separate peace by inflicting unacceptable damage to its army and by forcing it to fight for an important geographical feature.

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[117] Stone, op.cit., p.178; Cf. Afflerbach, op.cit., pp. 312-313.

Chapter Six:
Defence in the West

Falkenhayn's reluctant eastern venture in the spring and summer of 1915 had disturbed German plans for an offensive in the west. After Bethmann Hollweg's failure to bring about a separate peace with Russia in late 1914/early 1915, Falkenhayn had again turned to the west, in his eyes the most important theatre.[1] In keeping with the strategy outlined to Bethmann in November 1914, the General Staff Chief hoped to launch an offensive on the Western Front which would divide the two western allies and bring France to a separate peace. In order to do this, however, he had to find a solution to the tactical deadlock produced by the trenches, i.e. to find a way to break through the enemy positions and restore mobility to the war.

As 1915 began, the strategists of Germany and the Entente were thinking along similar lines. The results of previous offensives had convinced many leaders on both sides that if only a bit more pressure were applied, if only a bit more heavy artillery were employed, the enemy position could be broken through and mobility could thus be re-introduced to the war.[2] Once mobility had been restored, most strategists believed the war could be won quickly. To this end, both sides began preparing for an offensive which would break through the stalemate of the trenches.

The French, who had no second front to make demands upon their forces, put into motion the first major offensive of the year in early February in the Champagne region.[3] There, they hoped to drive through the German position, capture the vital rail line 5 kilometers behind the front, and cause the German northern front to collapse. Despite heavy losses, the French were unable either to pierce the strong German position or even to push the German front back the short distance needed to capture the Challerange-Bazancourt railway. The results of the month-long offensive was 240,000 French

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[1] Erich von Falkenhayn, General Headquarters and Its Critical Decisions, 1914-1916 (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1919) pp. 42-43.
[2] Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen, Der Durchbruch (Hamburg: Hanseatische Verlagsanstalt, 1937) p.32f.
[3] Throughout this chapter, please refer to Map 4 at the end of this work.

casualties[4] and a new term in German military vocabulary, "*Trommelfeuer,*" the continuous rain of heavy artillery shells upon the German positions.[5] By mid-March, the French were exhausted by their efforts and the initiative passed to the Germans.[6]

German Breakthrough Plans

The most pressing problem facing the OHL in early 1915 was reserves. After the failures of 1914, the German army needed time to rebuild. The reserves built up in January were sent to the east against the General Staff Chief's better judgement, and Falkenhayn had was forced to wait until early spring until additional units could be constructed.[7] As we have examined in Chapter 5, the reorganization of the German army directed by the Ministry of War's General Ernst von Wrisberg offered the prospect of a large number of new divisions by the end of March.[8] Consequently, on 3 March, the 11th Army was formed by the OHL, with the intention of utilizing it for the nucleus of a western attack group. Falkenhayn gave *General der Infantrie* von Fabeck command of this new army and named Hans von Seeckt as his chief of staff. Both officers had extensive experience on the Western Front; Fabeck had commanded an army group during the Ypres offensive and Seeckt had planned the III Corps' successful assault on Vailly. With these new units coming into being and with experience leaders on hand, Falkenhayn was able to return to his idea of a major offensive in France. Accordingly, he set the *Westheer*'s planning mechanism into motion, requesting plans for breakthrough operations from the armies on the Western Front.

By mid-March, Falkenhayn had received a number of plans, two of which seemed promising. On the same day as the 11th Army was formed, the OHL received the report of *Generalleutnant* Konrad Krafft von Dellmensingen, Chief of Staff to the 6th Army, which

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[4] Ibid., pp. 31-34. The Germans suffered only 45,000 casualties to the 240,000 French.
[5] Max Bauer, Der grosse Krieg in Feld und Heimat (Tübingen: Osiander'sche Buchhandlung, 1921) p.85.
[6] On the *Winterschlacht* in the Champagne see Der Weltkrieg Bd.VII: Die Operationen des Jahres 1915: Ereignisse im Winter und Frühjahr (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1931), pp. 35-53; and Ministère de la Guerre, Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre Tome II: La Stabilisation du Front – Les Attaques Locales (14 Novembre 1914-1 Mai 1915) (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1931) pp. 410-481.
[7] Heinz Krafft, Staatsräson und Kriegführung im kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914-1916: Der Gegensatz zwischen dem Generalstabschef von Falkenhayn und dem Oberbefehlshaber Ost im Rahmen des Bündniskrieges der Mittelmächte (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1980); Ekkehardt Guth, "Der Gegensatz zwischen dem Oberbefehlshaber Ost und dem Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres 1914/15," MGM 1/84 pp. 75-111.
[8] Ernst von Wrisberg, Heer und Heimat 1914-1918 (Leipzig: KF Koehler, 1921) pp. 16-17; Der Weltkrieg VII, p.303; Krafft, Der Durchbruch, p.36. Originally, it was hoped that 24 new divisions would be formed. In the end, Wrisberg's reorganization resulted in only 14.

called for a breakthrough in the area of Arras. The goal of this operation was the splitting of the British and French forces and the pushing of the British forces into the sea.[9] Ten days later, the OHL received a second promising plan from the 1st Army.

Generalleutnant Hermann von Kuhl, the Chief of Staff the 1st Army and author of this plan, believed the most favorable area for a breakthrough to be along the border of the 1st and the 7th Armies. Kuhl planned to attack along a 20-km front from Vailly eastwards across the Aisne and achieve a breakthrough in the French line from Condé to Paissy. The 1st Army believed that a tactical breakthrough in this area would result in operations returning to the "free field," and that the operations could be extended from here to Paris.[10]

After examining 1st Army's report, the new Minister of War, Adolf Wild von Hohenborn, expressed his doubts in the plan in a memorandum of 15 March. Wild believed that the OHL possessed sufficient forces to achieve a tactical breakthrough under the 1st Army's plan, but that the German strength was insufficient to turn the tactical success into a operational success. Wild believed the result of the operation would merely be a gain of "worthless" terrain, and not a "campaign decision" [*Feldzugsentscheidung*].[11] Indeed, Kuhl admitted the same faults in his plan in a second *Denkschrift* to the OHL later in the month.[12] While Falkenhayn continued to consider the 1st Army's plan, especially as a diversionary attack,[13] attention shifted to the 6th Army's proposals.

The task of carrying out and exploiting this breakthrough on the Western Front was to fall to the 11th Army. Consequently, when the staff of the 11th Army formed on 11 March in Kassel, Falkenhayn gave verbally to Seeckt the mission of examining areas of

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[9] Quoted in an untitled and unpublished manuscript of the Reichsarchiv in BA/MA, W10/50707, pp. 10-12. (Hereafter, "Durchbruchspläne") Although the original documents have been destroyed, this Reichsarchiv manuscript contains long excerpts from the original *Denkschriften*. This manuscript seems to have served as the basis for the chapter, "Erwägungen für einen kriegsentscheidenden Durchbruch im Westen," in Der Weltkrieg VII, pp. 307-323. See also Krafft, Der Durchbruch, pp. 36-42.

[10] AOK 1 to OHL, Ia Nr.1182, 13 March 1915, in "Durchbruchpläne," pp. 20-23. (Throughout this chapter, please refer to Map 4 located at the end of this work.)

[11] Adolph Wild von Hohenborn, 15 March 1915, in ibid., p.25.

[12] "Durchbruch im Westen," AOK 1 Ia Nr.1221, 18 March 1915, in ibid., p.32. This *Denkschrift* was submitted to the OHL by Kuhl personally, not as Chief of Staff of the 1st Army, and examines several possible breakthrough plans.

[13] Gerhard Tappen was sent to 7th Army for several weeks to serve as its Chief of Staff and to make a judgement on the 1st Army's plan. Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 7 March 1915, BA/MA, N56/1.

the Western Front for the coming offensive.[14] On 16 March Seeckt received his written orders. Falkenhayn wrote: "The *Oberste Heeresleitung* has the intention to break through the Western Front after sufficient forces have been assembled." Seeckt was to "reconnoitre the terrain between Canal la Bassée and the Avre Brook near Roye for an operation with the goal of breaking through the enemy position north of the Somme on a front 25 to 30 km wide and continuing to the sea."[15] The 11th Army's completed proposal was to be submitted by the end of the month. The OHL reserved for itself the right of preparing plans for the exploitation of the tactical breakthrough.

On 30 March, Seeckt submitted his report.[16] After examining the possibilities of a breakthrough along the 100-km stretch of front from Canal la Bassée to near Roye, he concluded that the area which offered the best tactical and operational conditions for a breakthrough was along a 25-km front running from north of Ficheux (just south of Arras) to south of Thiepval (just north of Albert). To Seeckt, this section of the front offered a number of advantages to an attacker. First, this section of front lay only around 65 kilometers from the coast. Second, Seeckt wrote that the enemy positions on this section of the front "appeared to be not more than average in strength, and in parts below average." Additionally, the area behind the front there was less developed than other areas of northern France; hence, there would be fewer areas upon which the enemy could form an effective center of renewed resistance. Last, as the attack developed, its left wing would be covered from an enemy counter-attack to a certain degree by the Somme. Seeckt believed that a successful breakthrough in this section of the front would lead to the separation of the northern and southern portions of the Allied armies.

Seeckt's report also outlined the 11th Army's plan of attack and the forces necessary. He envisioned the initial breakthrough of the 25-km front being carried out by a "breakthrough army" [*Durchbruchsarmee*] of five corps. This *Durchbruchsarmee* would be supported by a second wave, designed to protect its flanks and keep up the momentum of attack; one army corps would follow behind its right wing, another behind its center, and two behind its left wing. While the right wing of the *Durchbruchsarmee* would advance in a northwesternly direction on Warlus and Couy en Artois, the center

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[14] Hans von Seeckt, Aus meinem Leben 1866-1917 (ed. Friedrich von Rabenau) (Leipzig: Hase & Koehler, 1938) p.102.
[15] OHL to AOK 11, 16 March 1915, quoted in "Durchbruchspläne," p.27.
[16] 11th Army, Ia Nr.7g, 30 March 1915. The following paragraphs are drawn from the extracts of Seeckt's report in "Durchbruchpläne," pp. 52-59. See also Der Weltkrieg VII, pp. 318-320.

would drive on Avesnes le Comte and the left wing would cover the army from a southern attack. Seeckt also felt a second army of five corps would be necessary to carry the attack forward enough to split completely the Allied armies. When the attacking German forces reached Doullens, he believed the objective of dividing the enemy armies would have been achieved. The breakthrough assault would have to be supported by large amounts of artillery. At least one heavy field howitzer battery for every 200 meters of the front was necessary, in all 125 batteries. He further recommended an additional 30 heavy cannon and heavy howitzer batteries.

Through March and April, Falkenhayn took further steps to implement his offensive intentions in the west. On 29 March, Falkenhayn issued a directive covering defensive doctrine designed to make the *Westheer*'s positions stronger and allow the release of more troops to serve as an OHL reserve (a process to which he would return later in the year). This directive covered items from the construction of reinforced shelters for trench garrisons to the improvement of wire entanglements. Additionally, each corps was to prepare plans for an offensive in its sector.[17] The *Westheer* had been largely on the defensive for a considerable time, and this last element of Falkenhayn's directive indicates he felt it necessary to improve the offensive capability of the army, even if only through staff exercises.

Two days after this first directive, another entitled, "Training of the OHL Reserve," was issued by the OHL. Falkenhayn wrote, "The units standing behind the front as an OHL reserve are intended for use in an offensive...." As such, they were to receive, "careful training in the area of technical attacks [*besonders sorgfältige Schulung in dem Gebrauch der technischen Angriffsmittel*]." Exercise areas, with model enemy trenches, were to be constructed behind the front lines to achieve these training goals. The directive specified that the training was to begin with small units and to progress ultimately to the division. Further, in an effort to spread the knowledge obtained in previous offensives by other units, Falkenhayn specified that these reserve units should study the reports of the 1st Army's successful limited offensives at Vailly and Soissons, as well as share knowledge amongst themselves.[18]

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[17] OHL Nr.19305, 29 March 1915, BA/MA, W10/51308; Der Weltkrieg VII, p.316.
[18] OHL, "Ausbildung der Reserven der Obersten Heeresleitung," Nr.19500, 31 March 1915, BA/MA, W10/51308; Der Weltkrieg VII, p.317. This training scheme seems to have been separate from the formation of the *Sturmabteilung* in the VIII Army Corps, which would develop into the stormtroops of later

The plans for a breakthrough produced by the *Westheer* in March contain many similarities and provide an insight into the minds of the German military leadership in early 1915. Clearly, both the *Westheer*'s commanders and the OHL, despite the evidence of the recent French offensive, believed a breakthrough to be possible, if sufficient forces were properly employed. Seeckt's report of 30 March, what seems to be OHL's final plan, called for the breakthrough to be carried out by 14 army corps, including 11 newly built corps. This compared with the 17 army corps required by Krafft's plan and the 9 ½ required by Kuhl's plan of 13 March. Additionally, each plan called for the initial breakthrough to be supported by large amounts of heavy artillery.

Propitious terrain, however, was more important than weight of forces to each of these authors. All three *Denkschriften* stressed the necessity of choosing the most favorable sector of front for the breakthrough attempt. Kuhl's opinion speaks for all three authors:

> Der Ort, wo der Durchbruch stattfinden soll, muss so gewählt werden, dass der Angriff taktisch günstig ist, starke Teile des Gegners geschlagen oder abgedrängt werden und vor allem ein erneutes Festsetzen in vorbereiteten rückwärtigen Stellungen verhindert wird.[19]

Given their own experience at defense, the Germans were clear that the portion of the front picked for a breakthrough had to be carefully chosen. The enemy trench system must not be inordinately strong and the terrain had to be favorable to the attacker. All three authors chose a section of the front which offered few natural features upon which the enemy could fall back and reorganize their defense. The pressing need to choose the proper sector for a breakthrough led Falkenhayn to assign Seeckt, the chief of staff of the force intended to execute the offensive, the task of personally reconnoitring the front.

All three authors also identified other important elements in ensuring a successful breakthrough. First, each author wrote of the necessity of a powerful diversionary attack, designed to tie down enemy forces far from the point of decision. Second, each stressed the importance of hitting the enemy quickly and powerfully with a surprise blow. In Krafft's words, the enemy position "...must be completely smashed. The first blow must break in with elemental force [*mit elementarer Wucht*] and with all possible surprise..."[20]

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in the war. See Bruce I. Gudmundsson, Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918 (New York: Praeger, 1989).

[19] AOK 1 to OHL, Ia Nr. 1182, 13 March 1915, quoted in "Durchbruchpläne," pp. 18-19.

[20] AOK 6 to OHL, 3 March 1915 in ibid., p.9.

Kuhl wrote similarly and with reference to French attacks: "It must not come to the French procedure, one corps after the other being pushed against the enemy position. We must strive for surprise at all costs. The breakthrough must succeed suddenly [*schlagartig*]."[21] Further, each author highlighted the importance of maintaining the momentum of the attack once the initial breakthrough had succeeded.

All three authors emphasized the importance of heavy artillery, particularly heavy howitzers with their high-trajectory fire, in breaking through an enemy trench system. However, they put far less importance in weight of artillery than did the Entente planners. Instead, after the experience of successful limited attacks at Vailly and Soissons, the German planners emphasized short but accurate bombardments, which focused on key enemy targets (strongpoints, enemy observation posts, enemy artillery, etc.). Such bombardments allowed for more selective targeting and also had the significant advantage of maintaining the element of surprise. Each plan called for close artillery/infantry co-operation, and Krafft even wrote of the importance of using aerial observation for the artillery, for which he recommended the employment of 20 aircraft *Abteilungen*.[22]

Throughout the planning in the spring of 1915, Falkenhayn had reserved for himself the responsibility of directing the exploitation of any breakthrough, merely giving the 11th Army the task of planning the breakthrough itself.[23] Thus, the General Staff Chief kept in his hands the strategic direction of the campaign. Unfortunately, with the evidence which has survived, it is difficult to determine exactly Falkenhayn's strategic intentions in early 1915. However, given the strategy he outlined to Bethmann in November 1914 and the planning that was carried out by the *Westheer* some conclusions can be drawn.

First, as we have seen, Falkenhayn did not believe that the forces at Germany's disposal would allow for a "decisive" battle to be fought. He told the Chancellor plainly that at least one enemy would have to be detached from the anti-German coalition if Germany were to have any chance of winning the war. In the spring of 1915, evidence suggests that Falkenhayn aimed to force France into a separate peace. First, the General Staff Chief gave the 11th Army the task of "breaking through the enemy front ... with the

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[21] AOK 1 to OHL, Ia Nr.1182, 13 March 1915 in ibid., p.19.
[22] AOK 6 to OHL, 3 March 1915 in ibid., p.13.
[23] Falkenhayn to 11 AOK, 16 March 1915, quoted in "Durchbruchpläne," p.27.

goal of driving to the sea."[24] In a comment to Kuhl's *Denkschrift* of 18 March, Falkenhayn wrote that if the British army could be divided from the French and forced to retreat from the Continent, "then the French would certainly be finished with their ally."[25] The plan devised by Seeckt clearly aimed at the separation of the forces of the two nations. However, we cannot know how Falkenhayn then planned to force the British from the Continent. Indeed, it is questionable if Germany would have had the forces necessary to reach even this limited goal. Seeckt's plan required 14 army corps and numerous heavy artillery batteries just for the breakthrough and drive to the coast.[26] Despite the hopes raised by Wrisberg's reorganization plan the OHL had built up a reserve of only 16 divisions behind the Western Front by the middle of April;[27] clearly, not enough to carry out Seeckt's plan, let alone any exploitation.

In the end, despite all the preparation, Falkenhayn's plans for a breakthrough operation in the west were brought quickly to a halt by the deteriorating position of Germany's ally, Austria-Hungary. As we have seen in Chapter 5, in April 1915, Falkenhayn was forced to send substantial reinforcement to the east, including the spearhead of his upcoming western operation, the 11th Army. The resulting offensive in Galicia drew in more and more German units as Falkenhayn sought to deal Russia a blow which would bring her either to the negotiating table or would damage her army so much that she would be unable to threaten Austria-Hungary with an offensive for an extended period of time. The OHL was forced once again to allow the initiative in the west to pass to the Entente.

Defensive Doctrine

Forced to postpone his plans for an offensive in the west and faced with increasing demands for troops in the east, Falkenhayn shifted from preparing for an attack and instead concentrated on securing, with the smallest number of troops, the Western Front from Entente assaults. The Entente attacks during the winter, especially those of the French in the Champagne, had at times come close to breaking through the German position and had forced the Germans to re-examine their defensive doctrine as

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[24] Ibid.
[25] Comment to Kuhl's Denkschrift, ibid., p.36.
[26] Falkenhayn had originally refused the 6th Army's plan on the fact that it required too many units. Krafft, Der Durchbruch, p.40.
[27] Der Weltkrieg VII, p.314.

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keeping the troops alive. Troops arrayed behind the first trench survived enemy attacks more easily and could be used to drive the enemy out with counterattacks.[31]

The success of these measures seemed proven by the poor results of the Entente offensives in Artois in May and June, and, increasingly, the safety of the German position in the west seemed assured to the OHL.[32] On 6 June, Falkenhayn travelled from Pless to the OHL's western headquarters in Mézières to begin an inspection of the front.[33] Upon his arrival, Falkenhayn found the 1st, 2nd , and 6th Armies involved in "severe" battles, but everywhere the German troops held their own against Entente attacks. After meeting with the chiefs of staff of the *Westheer*, Falkenhayn was convinced that the Entente attacks would achieve no meaningful results and that the *Westheer* would be able to give up several units for use in the east (these would be replaced with fought-out units from the east).[34] On 10 June, Falkenhayn returned to Pless to direct the ongoing offensive in Galicia, convinced in the ability of the *Westheer* to ward off any Entente offensive. Tappen wrote in his diary, "Generally, situation good [in the west]. Relief of troops shall take place."[35]

Falkenhayn's trip to the Western Front in early June brought a number of steps designed to strengthen the *Westheer*'s defensive position further and free additional troops for use "in other theatres." First, shortly after Falkenhayn's return to the east, several officers from the OHL in Pless were ordered to the west with important missions. On 20 June, *Generalmajor* von Mertens, the general of engineers of the 10th Army, was ordered by Falkenhayn to the west. The purpose of his mission is today somewhat hazy. The Reichsarchiv reported that General von Mertens' task was to establish a military line of demarcation for a future peace between Germany and the Entente.[36] This view is somewhat supported by Falkenhayn's ideas at the time concerning a separate peace. (See

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[31] William Balck, Die Entwickelung der Taktik im Weltkriege (Berlin: R.Eisenschmidt, 1922) pp. 84-85. For an example of how the revised instructions were issued at corps level see, "The Lessons of the recent fighting in the Ban de Sapt," [German] XV Reserve Corps, Ia Nr.1635, 17 July 1915, PRO, WO 157/1. See also Friedrich Seeßelberg, et.al., Der Stellungskrieg 1914-1918 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1926) pp. 102-230.

[32] Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg Bd.VIII: Die Operationen des Jahres 1915: Die Ereignisse im Westen im Frühjahr und Sommer, im Osten vom Frühjahr bis zum Jahresschluss (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1932) pp. 55-78.

[33] When the OHL relocated to Pless in May, it left behind a number of officers under the command of Fritz von Loßberg, then the Ia of the OHL, at its headquarters in Mézières to liaise with the *Westheer*. See Fritz von Loßberg, Meine Tätigkeit im Weltkriege 1914-1918 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1939) p.148.

[34] The orders were originally sent on 2 June but the transport of units was postponed until Falkenhayn visited the west. OHL to 4th Army, 2 June 1915, OHL Nr.1948r; OHL to *Armee-Abteilungen Gaede* and *Falkenhausen*, 2 June 1915, OHL Nr.1950r, BA/MA, W10/51388.

[35] Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 10 June 1915.

[36] Der Weltkrieg VIII, p.610.

below) However, the OHL's *Bürooffizier*, Major Friedrich Mewes, wrote that Mertens' mission was much more radical. He maintained that Mertens was sent to the west to identify a position upon which the *Westheer* could fall back and hold with far fewer troops.[37] Falkenhayn, driven by the requirements of his eastern offensive, seems to have considered seriously for a time a shortening of the Western Front, designed to free more reserves for employment in the east. While in the end Falkenhayn chose not to undertake a general withdrawal to a shorter position in the west, he still needed to find more troops to feed his eastern venture. Shortly after Mertens' return to the east, two more officers went from the OHL's headquarters at Pless to the Western Front as part of Falkenhayn's general re-organization.

On 3 July, *General der Infantrie* Eberhard von Claer and *General der Artillerie* Ludwig Lauter were sent by the OHL to the Western Front.[38] Claer's task was to referee the debate which had developed within the western OHL over the *Westheer*'s various defensive systems and recommend a single, common system to be used by all armies on the front.[39] Lauter's mission was to examine the artillery of the *Westheer* and to update the artillery training procedures and manuals, taking into account the most recent lessons and requirements of position warfare.[40] Re-establishing a common infantry and artillery doctrine in the armies of the *Westheer* would go a long way towards creating a more secure front, and bring Falkenhayn the troops he needed for his offensive in the east.

Over the course of 1915, much attention had been paid to creating a new infantry defensive doctrine, but the equally important artillery doctrine had been neglected. Under the direction of Lauter, the artillery of the *Westheer* was to be overhauled. The experiences of the previous battles on the Western Front had taught the importance of artillery in defense, and through the summer, the OHL issued directives on the proper employment of artillery in defensive battles. The Germans had admitted that their

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[37] Mewes to Reichsarchiv, 15 August and 8 September 1931, BA/MA, W10/51408. Mewes suggestion that the Reichsarchiv query Majors Harbou and Geyer about Mertens' mission seems not to have been pursued.
[38] Eberhard von Claer, Inspector General of Fortresses from 1913, became *General vom Ingenieur- und Pionierkorps im Grossen Hauptquartier* at the war's outbreak and Ludwig Lauter, the Inspector General of Artillery since 1911, became the *General der Fussartillerie im Grossen Hauptquartier* in August 1914.
[39] Bauer, op.cit., p.86. For a full discussion of the debates on defensive doctrine in 1915 see, Samuels, op.cit., pp. 159-170. G.C. Wynne's If Germany Attacks: The Battle in Depth in the West (London: Faber and Faber, 1939) offers an interpretation based almost solely on Loßberg's memoirs.
[40] Der Weltkrieg VIII, pp. 98-99; Loßberg, op.cit., pp. 157-158. Loßberg recorded that Claer earned himself the sobriquet, "Grabenschreck," or "Terror of the Trenches."

artillery had been "unable to combat the effects of the French artillery on our [defending] infantry." However, the German defensive artillery was able to obtain

> ...very successful results against the enemy's infantry, either by directing a heavy fire against the infantry positions from which the attack was issuing, and thus bringing it to a standstill, or else by directing a rapid and concentrated fire against the attack itself.[41]

The artillery of the *Westheer*'s armies, reinforced when necessary from the OHL artillery reserve, would assemble at threatened points and be parcelled out to subordinate formations as necessary. The combined fire of the guns would be crucial to destroying the attacking enemy infantry as they left their trenches and to cutting the attacking troops off from their rearward communications.[42] New techniques of observation and planned fire were introduced, including specialized ranging detachments behind the German lines designed to facilitate counter-battery fire. Lauter ensured that each army was employing its artillery most efficiently and that pre-war training manuals were updated to reflect the most recently lessons of *Stellungskrieg*.[43]

As the reorganization of the *Westheer* progressed, Falkenhayn again travelled to the west. On 29 July, he conducted a meeting with all the chiefs of staff of the *Westheer*, which gives us important clues to Falkenhayn's strategic thinking in the summer of 1915. Falkenhayn opened by thanking the chiefs in the name of the Kaiser for their good work in warding off the Entente attacks and in giving the *Ostheer* the breathing room necessary to conduct operations. During this meeting, Falkenhayn expressed his belief that the Western Allies would not attack anytime in the near future and that, if they did, the "Iron Wall" in the west, strengthened by the recent re-organization, would undoubtedly hold firm. Falkenhayn opined that the French did not have the necessary will to undertake a major offensive and that the British were too pre-occupied with events in Gallipoli. A German attack in the west, Falkenhayn's wish, was also ruled out in the near future –

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[41] AOK 3, "Experiences Gained in the Winter Battles in Champagne," CDS 303.
[42] OHL, "Barrage Fire in case of Attack and the Necessary Expenditure of Ammunition," Nr.3550, 11 July 1915, PRO, WO157/3.
[43] The change in artillery doctrine necessitated altering some long-held beliefs about the employment of artillery. See Major Justrow, "Die artilleristische Waffe," in Seeßelberg, op.cit., pp. 254-281; and also Major Dr.-Ing. Karl Becker, "Schiesstechnik und Ballistik," in ibid., pp. 282-291. The heavy artillery [*Fußartillerie*] arm, which was trained for *Festungskrieg*, made the adjustment easier than the field artillery [*Feldartillerie*].

operations in the east would not be concluded for some time.[44] Based on these beliefs, the General Staff Chief ordered additional units to be withdrawn from the west for use in the east.[45]

Falkenhayn remained convinced through the summer that the Entente would not launch a major offensive in the near future and that the re-organized *Westheer* could defend against any Entente attack. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that in the summer of 1915 Falkenhayn believed that, far from planning an offensive, the French were ready for peace. On 30 June, he sent a memorandum to Bethmann and the *Auswärtiges Amt* outlining his assessment of the French. In its conclusion Falkenhayn wrote:

> Frankreichs Opfer sind in diesem Krieg so Reisenhaft, dass die Regierung weder vor dem Volke noch einst vor der Geschichte die Verantwortung dafür wird tragen können und in Bälde vor die Frage gestellt sein wird, zu entscheiden, ob nicht die Aufgabe des Widerstandes der Zukunft der Nation dienlicher sein wird als die Fortsetzung des für Frankreich trotz aller auswärtigen Hilfen aussichtlosen Krieges.[46]

The failure of the French to launch a great relief offensive in August reinforced Falkenhayn's belief that the French were incapable of a further great effort.[47] Indeed, he remained firm in this belief, despite the growing evidence of a coming offensive offered by the 6th and 3rd Armies, until he had seen the offensive with his own eyes on 25 September.

Accordingly, Falkenhayn continued to focus his effort in the east and to strip the *Westheer* of its reserves. However, many German leaders were still fearful of another powerful Entente offensive; both Kronprinz Wilhelm and Kronprinz Rupprecht complained about the weakness of the *Westheer*.[48] By 22 September, on the eve of a major Entente offensive, the OHL reserve on the Western Front had been reduced to four infantry divisions and two independent infantry brigades. Additionally, the *Gardekorps* and the staff of the X Corps with its 20th Division had arrived in Belgium in mid-

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[44] "Die Besprechung in Metz am 29.Juli 1915," BA/MA, W10/51312, contains the war diary entries for the chiefs of staff participating in the conference. See also Der Weltkrieg VIII, pp. 100-101, which relies upon the diary entries of Hermann Ritter Mertz von Quirnheim.
[45] Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 30 July 1915.
[46] Der Weltkrieg VIII, pp. 609-610.
[47] Falkenhayn, op.cit., p.166.
[48] Both Kronprinz Wilhelm and Kronprinz Rupprecht expressed their concern about the possibility of an enemy offensive and the weakness of the *Westheer*. Der Weltkrieg Bd.IX: Die Operationen des Jahres 1915: Die Ereignisse im Westen und auf dem Balkan vom Sommer bis zum Jahresschluss (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1933) p.17 and p.27.

September for rest after the campaign in Russia and were available as a reserve in an emergency. The OHL artillery reserve, crucial to any defensive battle, consisted of 13 modern heavy batteries and 11 older heavy batteries. Facing this meagre reserve of four full-strength divisions, three tired divisions, and two brigades, the OHL intelligence reckoned that the French and English possessed a reserve of 50 divisions.[49]

The Herbstschlacht *in the Champagne*

Despite Falkenhayn's confidence that the French did not have the will to launch another great offensive, the commander of the 3rd Army, *Generaloberst* Karl von Einem, believed otherwise. Shortly after Falkenhayn's meeting with the chiefs of staff, the German 3rd Army began noting French preparations for a major offensive.[50] In early August, Einem noted French preparations for a new offensive in the Champagne, but wrote, "we calmly and confidently await the attack."[51] Throughout the month, the offensive preparations in front of Einem's 3rd Army as well as in front of Kronprinz Rupprecht's 6th Army became more and more apparent and more threatening. By the end of the month, Einem began re-organizing his army to strengthen threatened points on his front. He also began requesting infantry and artillery reinforcement from the OHL.[52] On 7 September, General Lauter, the OHL's artillery officer, arrived to examine the 3rd Army's artillery preparations and requirements. Convinced of an impending French offensive, Lauter recommended an immediate reinforcement of 10 heavy artillery batteries.[53] Falkenhayn, however, continued to believe the French preparations to be a feint, and in response to the 3rd Army's requests for reinforcement, he offered only limited artillery and infantry reinforcement and more artillery ammunition.[54]

As September progressed, however, French intentions became clearer. From the beginning of the month, French deserters reported the coming offensive. One deserter

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[49] Der Weltkrieg IX, p.100; Loßberg, op.cit., pp. 161-162. The *Gardekorps* had suffered 21,000 casualties in the Russian campaign and was in the process of inducting recruits.
[50] This offensive has been called "one of the worst-kept secrets of the war." Richard Griffiths, Marshal Pétain (London: Constable, 1994, first published 1970) p.14.
[51] Karl von Einem, "Kriegstagebuch," 11 August 1915, BA/MA, N324/12. Einem's diary was published in edited form after the war as Ein Armeeführer erlebt den Weltkrieg (ed. Junius Alter) (Leipzig: v.Hase & Koehler, 1938). As the publish version omits many details, I have used the original.
[52] Loßberg, op.cit., pp. 162-163.
[53] Einem, "Kriegstagebuch," 5 and 7 September 1915; Oberstleutnant a.D. Muths, "Die deutsche schwere Artillerie im August bis Dezember 1915," Appendix 3 to "Forschungsarbeit zu Band IX," BA/MA, W10/51353, p.10.
[54] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.166; Der Weltkrieg IX, pp. 32-34.

confessed that a major offensive was to begin between 14 and 21 September. These rumours were supported by reports from German agents. By the 16th, the 3rd Army had identified, in addition to the two previous corps, three new French corps on its front and large numbers of French heavy batteries.[55] Further, the French began pushing their trenches closer to the German positions in an effort to reduce the distance the infantry had to cover during an assault.[56] All evidence pointed to a coming major French offensive, and the OHL's *Nachrichtenabteilung* reported on 7 September that they expected a French offensive, with a main attack in Champagne and a diversionary attack in Artois, any day.[57] Even Falkenhayn's normally sceptical operations officer, Gerhard Tappen, began to believe that an offensive was impending.[58]

In fact, against Einem's 3rd Army stood Noël de Castelnau's *groupe d'armées du centre*, composed of two French armies, the 2nd under Fernande de Langle de Cary and the 4th under Philippe Pétain. Castelnau's army group had been preparing an offensive since early July and had accumulated a powerful striking force. Einem's 8 divisions faced 27 French divisions and the 3rd Army's 600 some artillery pieces were overwhelmed by the 683 heavy and 1443 light French guns. The French also massed cavalry divisions behind the infantry in order to exploit the expected breakthrough. At the French *Schwerpunkt*, the German VIII Reserve Corps faced five French corps.[59]

The French, determined not to repeat the mistakes of earlier offensives, paid meticulous attention to preparations for this attack. Since early August, the French had followed a policy of rotating their assault divisions into the front line, giving them enough time to become familiar with the terrain but not enough time to suffer serious casualties.[60] Joffre hoped that this great accumulation of troops supported by masses of artillery, like at Gorlice, would give the little extra needed to punch through the German lines into open ground. Stealing another page from Falkenhayn's book, Joffre believed that a powerful diversionary attack in Artois to be important in keeping the Germans

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[55] Einem, "Kriegstagebuch," 31 August to 16 September 1915.
[56] Arndt von Kirchbach, Kämpfe in der Champagne (Winter 1914-Herbst 1915) (Der große Krieg in Einzeldarstellungen H.11) (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stelling, 1919) p.70.
[57] Hauptmann a.D. Krogh, "Kriegstagebuch," 7 September 1915, BA/MA, W10/51305.
[58] Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 5 September 1915. On the 21st, however, he wrote that commanders of the *Westheer*'s armies seemed excessively nervous.
[59] Ministère de la Guerre, Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre Tome III: Les Offensives de 1915-L'Hiver de 1915-1916 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1923) p. 310; "Beispiele für Artillerie-Stärken bei Durchbruchsangriffen," BA/MA, W10/50160. See Appendix 1.
[60] AOK 3, Die Champagne-Herbstschlacht 1915 (Munich: Albert Langen, 1916) pp. 24ff.

guessing as to the location of the main attack. The greatly weakened *Westheer* was shortly to be attacked by a vastly superior enemy.[61]

At 7:00am on 22 September, the French opened their *Trommelfeuer* in the Champagne and in Artois. Einem recorded in his diary on the same day that he awaited the French infantry attack at any moment. In fact, the firing on the 22nd signalled the beginning of a 72-hour bombardment that in the end obliterated many German positions, wiped out their garrisons, swept away the German wire, destroyed artillery observation posts, and cut rearward communications. The bombardment also extended far beyond the forward trenches in an effort to hinder the Germans from bringing forward reinforcement. The rail facilities at Bazancourt and Challerange were destroyed and 3rd Army's headquarters was attacked by French aircraft. The Germans observed an average of 30 to 35 French batteries directed against each German division. For 3 days, the smoke and dust kicked up by the French fire blocked out the sun above the position of the German 3rd Army.[62]

In all, the French 2nd and 4th Armies fired close to 3.4 million artillery rounds (including almost 600,000 heavy rounds) on the 3rd Army's positions during their preparatory bombardment.[63] The *Trommelfeuer* fell heaviest against *Generalleutnant* Fleck's VIII Reserve Corps, where the French intended to concentrate their main effort.[64] French preparations over the past month had convinced the 3rd Army that the main French blow would fall in the VIII Reserve Corps' sector (and on its neighbour, the 21st Reserve Division of the 5th Army) and efforts had been made to reinforce this position. Here Einem collected most of his artillery reserve, and upon the opening of the French *Trommelfeuer*, further heavy artillery reinforcement arrived from the OHL.[65]

Despite the beginning of the French bombardment on 22 September, Falkenhayn remained sceptical of French intentions. The General Staff Chief had left Pless on 21 September for the west to judge for himself the seriousness of the situation. On the 24th,

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[61] Les Armées Françaises III, pp. 275-278; Griffiths, op.cit., pp. 13-14.
[62] AOK 3, Die Champagne-Herbstschlacht, pp. 31-39; Kirchbach, op.cit., pp. 74-77; Der Weltkrieg IX, pp. 48-49.
[63] Les Armées Françaises III, p.537. Ironically, the French blamed insufficient ammunition for the failure of the offensive. p.548.
[64] The VIII Reserve Corps was composed of the Division Liebert (15th Reserve Division), the 50th Infantry Division, and the Division Ditfurth (16th Reserve Division). It held a front of around 20 kilometers. Fleck had distinguished himself in command of an army group during the previous French offensives in the Champagne.
[65] Kirchbach, op.cit., pp. 75-76; Der Weltkrieg IX, pp. 49-50; Muths, op.cit., p.10.

in a discussion with Einem, he repeated his belief that the French did not have the will to launch a major offensive.[66] Several French probing attacks against VIII Reserve Corps were repulsed on the 24th, reinforcing his opinion.[67] Kronprinz Rupprecht later recalled that Falkenhayn expressed to the Kaiser the view that the 3rd Army saw things "far too black."[68] Nevertheless, the General Staff Chief took a number of steps to reinforce the 3rd Army. First, he placed the 5th Infantry Division, which had been ear-marked for the Serbian campaign, at the disposal of the 3rd Army.[69] Then, from 22 to 24 September, 23 heavy batteries were transferred to the 3rd Army from various areas of the front.[70]

At 9:15am on 25 September, the long-awaited French infantry offensive began. As expected, the attack fell heaviest against the VIII Reserve Corps and its neighbour, the 5th Army's 21st Reserve Division. Here, 5 German divisions were attacked by 19 French divisions with almost three times the number of guns.[71] The efforts of the French preparatory bombardment had paid handsome dividends. In many areas, the attacking French infantry found the German positions to be almost completely destroyed and the remaining defenders to be too stunned to offer meaningful resistance.[72] Indeed, many German defenders were caught by French infantry in their dugouts before they could man their positions.[73] The bombardment had also done a good job of cutting German communications, making it difficult for the German infantry to call in artillery support or request reinforcement. Supported by a gas attack, the French quickly broke into the German position and began rolling up the trenches. Before noon, several French corps had made deep penetrations into the German position, overrunning completely the first German line. The French command poured reserves into the initial breaches.[74]

As the French attacks began on the morning of the 25th, Falkenhayn and the Kaiser, who were on a tour of the *Westheer*'s armies, were preparing to leave Montmedy

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[66] Einem, "Kriegstagebuch," 24 September 1915, "Ich spreche mit Falkenhayn und mache ihn auf die sehr ernste Lage aufmerksam. Er meint jedoch, die Franzosen hätten keinen Schneid..."
[67] Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 24 September 1915; Der Weltkrieg IX, p.51.
[68] [Wilhelm] Solger, "Die Leitung des deutschen Westheeres im September und Oktober 1915 seit dem Begin der Herbstschlacht in der Champagne und im Artois," unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/51353, p.1.
[69] After the war, Einem wrote that he believed the 5th Infantry Division was released to the 3rd Army far too late in the battle. Einem to Reichsarchiv, 17 September 1932, BA/MA, W10/51352.
[70] Der Weltkrieg IX, p.50.
[71] Noël de Castelnau, "Rapport d'ensemble sur les operations offensives de Champagne (Septembre 1915)," 1 November 1915, Les Armées Françaises III, Annexes IV, Annexe Nr.3019.
[72] AOK 3, Die Champagne-Herbstschlacht, pp. 55ff; Kirchbach, op.cit., p.86; Report of 14 Corps d'Armée, Nr.144, 1 October 1915, Les Armées Françaises III, Annexes III, Annexe Nr.2513.
[73] Der Weltkrieg IX, p.61.

for the 5th Army's headquarters at Stenay, 60 kilometers away. Before leaving Montmedy, the *Westheer*'s morning reports arrived at around 10:00am, forwarded by Loßberg from Mézières.[75] The contents of the initial reports confirmed Falkenhayn's previous opinion of the French intentions. The 3rd Army reported that in its sector the French artillery fire continued as before. The 3rd Army staff, whose communications with its units had been severely restricted by the effects of French artillery fire, was unable to determine whether or not a French attack had taken place during the night or in the early hours of the morning. The 6th Army reported that although infantry attacks had taken place, they appeared "to be insignificant."[76]

By the time Falkenhayn and the Kaiser had arrived at Stenay, the staffs of the 6th and 3rd Armies had begun to realize the scale of the Entente operations, and Falkenhayn found grave reports waiting for him. The 6th Army reported to the OHL at 12:30pm that the enemy had broken into its position in a number of places and that all its reserves had been committed to battle. Rupprecht wrote, "further immediate reinforcement is necessary."[77] At 12:15, 3rd Army called its neighbour, the 5th Army, with an urgent request for reinforcement, saying that the "enemy has broken through in the area of Souain-Somme Py." As the 5th Army's XVIII Reserve Corps was already heavily engaged in battle, the 3rd Army's request was refused by Kronprinz Wilhelm.[78] Further, a tense telephone conversation took place between Falkenhayn and Einem and his chief of staff, *Generalleutnant* Ritter von Höhn, in which Falkenhayn felt it necessary to remind Einem that the Kaiser expected "every man to do his duty."[79] Falkenhayn soon left Stenay for the OHL headquarters at Mézières.

Falkenhayn began to take steps to reinforce the threatened sectors even before he left Stenay. He ordered the 192nd Infantry Brigade from reserve behind the 7th Army to the 6th Army and the 56th Infantry Division from *Armeeabteilung Falkenhausen* to the 3rd Army. After arriving at Mézières, he ordered the *Gardekorps* be transported from its rest areas south of Brussels to the 6th Army and the X Army Corps headquarters with its 20th Infantry Division from its rest area south of Antwerp to the 3rd Army. Later, he re-routed

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[74] Les Armées Françaises III, pp. 372-373.
[75] Loßberg, op.cit., p.164.
[76] AOK 3 and AOK 6, "Morgenmeldung, 25 September 1915," printed in Solger, op.cit., p.2.
[77] AOK 6, "Mittagsmeldung, 25 September 1915,"in Solger, op.cit, p.3.
[78] "Niederschrift eines Fernspruchs oder Fernspräches von AOK 3 and AOK 5, 25 September 1915, 12:15," printed in Solger, op.cit., p.4.
[79] Einem, "Kriegstagebuch," 25 September 1915.

the 192nd Infantry Brigade to the 3rd Army. Einem also received a battalion of heavy field howitzers from the 7th Army.[80] It would, however, take several hours for these reinforcements to arrive, and until that time, the 6th and 3rd Armies were left to their own devices.[81]

As the day progressed, the extent of the French penetration in the 3rd Army's sector slowly became known to the OHL, and it became apparent that the most threatening attack was in the 3rd Army's sector rather than in Artois. The VIII Reserve Corps' 15th Reserve Division and 50th Infantry Division had been forced back to their second defensive position (*R-Stellung*), and its 16th Reserve Division had also been badly shaken.[82] All local counterattacks had failed to re-take the divisions' initial positions. Throughout the day, Einem rushed reserves as they arrived forward to stem the breach, but they were only barely able to hold the VIII Reserve Corps' incomplete *R-Stellung*;[83] in some areas the VIII Reserve Corps had even been pushed out of its forward-most positions within the *R-Stellung*.[84] Each of the corps' divisions had lost close to 5,000 men and the 50th Infantry Division had lost a number of its guns.[85] After the first day, the VIII Reserve Corps' commander, *Generalleutnant* Fleck, was so shaken by the French attack that he recommended a general withdrawal of his corps early in the evening.[86]

Indeed, there is some evidence to show that not only Fleck, but the command of the 3rd Army as well was badly shaken by the events of the day and were unable to come to grips with the fast moving situation. The 3rd Army's written reports for the day seem to indicate that its staff had little grasp of the day's battle and are worth quoting at some length. At 1:50pm, the 3rd Army reported:

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[80] Der Weltkrieg IX, pp. 66-68. The X Army Corps' 20th Infantry Division was still in transit from the Eastern Front.

[81] Communications between the *Operations*- and the *Nachrichtenabteilungen* of the OHL seemed to have been exceedingly poor. Despite being repeatedly warned of the impending French attack by the N-Abt, the O-Abt had developed no contingency plan. Major Hessig of the N-Abt recalled that in the crucial first few hours of the attack, personnel from the O-Abt flooded his office with requests for information about enemy strengths along the front. Hessig to Rauch, 4 July 1929, BA/MA, W10/51305.

[82] The 16th Reserve Division (Division Ditfurth) had even shown itself skittish before the battle. Its commander, *Generalmajor* Ditfurth had found it necessary to issue an order restricting the use of artillery as the division had been calling in fire whenever the enemy showed any signs of attack. 16th RD, Ia Nr.215, 11 August 1915, PRO, WO157/3.

[83] On the condition of the *R-Stellung* see, AOK 3, Die Champagne-Herbstschlacht, pp. 16-17.

[84] "Ferngespräch zwischen Höhn and Knobelsdorf, 5:30 pm, 25 September 1915," from the Akten of the 5th Army, quoted in Solger, op.cit., p.16.

[85] Der Weltkrieg IX, p.73; Loßberg, op.cit., p.168.

[86] Der Weltkrieg IX, p.71.

> Heute Vormittag erfolgte auf ganzer Front des XIII. Reserve- und des VIII. Reservekorps ein äußerst starker Infanterie-Angriff, Welle hinter Welle...
>
> Angriff bei 23.Reserve-Division abgeschlagen. Bei 24.Reserve-Division und Division Liebert ist der Feind an einigen Stellen eingebrochen. Einzelheiten fehlen.
>
> 50.Infanterie-Divison behauptet ihre Stellung. Der linke Flügel der Division Ditfurth ist etwas eingedrückt.

In fact, by 11:00am, both the 15th Reserve Division and the 50th Infantry Division had been pushed completely out of their first and into their second positions. At 3:05pm, the 3rd Army reported again to the OHL. Once again, its report showed little appreciation of the situation:

> XII. Reservekorps hat sehr starke Angriffe abgewiesen, etwa 600 Gefangene gemacht. Lage bei VIII.Reservekorps unübersichtlich. Kommandierender General meldet, das grosse Teile der vorderen Stellung, voraussichtlich auch viel Artillerie verloren gegangen sind. Rückwärtige Stellung wird gehalten. Es fehlt an Artillerie.

Two further reports in the evening and night showed a similar lack understanding of the situation by Fleck's VIII Reserve Corps. While this confusion was somewhat understandable given the great destruction of the communications network by French artillery, the 3rd Army could easily have gained a clearer picture of the confused situation by sending a representative from its staff to the front line.[87] No attempt seems to have been made to do this, despite the fact that the 5th Army had already sent its intelligence officer to the VIII Reserve Corps.[88]

This command muddle persuaded Falkenhayn, who was already dissatisfied with the 3rd Army, that changes were necessary. First, the 3rd Army was placed under the command of *Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz* on the afternoon of the 26th.[89] As the 5th Army was attacked as well, Falkenhayn felt that Wilhelm could better co-ordinate the defense of both armies.[90] The 5th Army's staff had also shown more initiative in dealing with the crisis. In addition to the intelligence officer from the 5th Army's staff, Kronprinz Wilhelm himself sought to make contact with the VIII Reserve Corps on the 25th to

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[87] 3rd Army's reports for 25 September 1915 are printed in Solger, op.cit., pp. 3-15.
[88] Höhn to Reichsarchiv, 15 July 1923, BA/MA, W10/51353.
[89] *Heeresgruppe Deutscher Kronprinz* had been formed in early August out of the 5th Army and *Armeeabteilungen Strantz*, *Falkenhausen*, and *Gaede*.
[90] Der Weltkrieg IX, pp. 72-73. Einem later wrote that he felt greatly insulted by this move, but realized it was the best way to get badly needed reinforcements from 5th Army. Einem to Reichsarchiv, 17 September 1932, BA/MA, W10/51352.

steady their shaken nerves, and his chief of staff, *Generalleutnant* Constantin Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, visited the threatened areas of the front.[91] It is quite probable that OHL received more information about the plight of the VIII Reserve Corps on the 25th from the 5th Army than from the 3rd Army.

This change in the command arrangements provided Falkenhayn with the opportunity to make changes within the 3rd Army staff as well. In the afternoon of the 26th, Falkenhayn telephoned 3rd Army headquarters to inform them of their new command relationship with the 5th Army. Einem's chief of staff, Höhn, was senior to Kronprinz Wilhelm's chief of staff, and consequently, told Falkenhayn that he refused to serve under a junior.[92] As a further notice of his dissatisfaction with the 3rd Army, Falkenhayn replaced Höhn immediately with Fritz von Loßberg.

Loßberg left Mézières with Falkenhayn's admonition to hold on to the remaining positions at all costs ringing in his ears and arrived at 3rd Army's headquarters at Vouziers around 3:30pm on the 26th. Immediately upon his arrival, he answered a call from General Fleck, asking if the planned withdrawal of VIII Reserve Corps was still to take place the next day. Loßberg replied, "The VIII Reserve Corps must stand and die in its current position."[93] Shortly thereafter, Loßberg visited Fleck's headquarters to see the situation for himself. There he met Schmidt von Knobelsdorf who also felt a personal visit necessary to calm the frayed nerves of the corps staff. The two army chiefs left after a short reconnaissance convinced that the VIII Reserve Corps would hold its current position (the original *R-Stellung*) with the reinforcements now arriving. Loßberg then left to tour the 3rd Army's remaining units.[94]

After reconnoitring the 3rd Army's position and examining the incoming reinforcements, Loßberg determined the 3rd Army's defensive position needed greater

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[91] Kronprinz Wilhelm, Meine Erinnerungen aus Deutschlands Heldenkampf (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1923) p.142.

[92] Höhn to Reichsarchiv, 15 July 1923, BA/MA, W10/51353. Einem wrote that Falkenhayn, not Höhn, bore the responsibility for the 3rd Army's desperate position as he had weakened the *Westheer* far too much pursuing his campaign in Russia. Einem, "Kriegstagebuch," 26 September 1915.

[93] Loßberg, op.cit., pp. 167-168. Loßberg wrote that Höhn had given permission for the VIII Reserve Corps to withdraw, and that this decision had caused Falkenhayn to dismiss him. After the war, Höhn denied ever giving such permission. Höhn to Reichsarchiv, 15 July 1923, BA/MA, W10/51353. Einem also later denied ever acquiescing to a withdrawal. Einem to Reichsarchiv, 17 September, 1932, BA/MA, W10/51352; see also his diary entry for the day, Einem, "Kriegstagebuch," 26 September 1915, in which he wrote that he learned of Fleck's plans from Knobelsdorf. The Id of VIII Reserve Corps, Förster, wrote that Fleck had already given the orders for a withdrawal by the time Loßberg arrived at 3rd Army headquarters. Förster to Nathusius, 5 October 1932, BA/MA, W10/51352.

[94] Loßberg, op.cit., p.172.

depth to withstand the renewed French attacks. After losing their first position on the 25th, the VIII Reserve Corps had fallen back on its incomplete *R-Stellung*. This position had the advantage, however, of being situated on the reverse slope of the Py Valley, and hence, sheltered from French observation.[95] Loßberg ordered this position to be held with few troops and artillery observers. Artillery was now to take over the burden of the battle. The French attacks were to be checked in the first instance by artillery fire called in by the observers in the front line.[96] Once a French attack started, the German guns were to cut the advancing French infantry from its rear and lay down a barrage on the trenches from which the French were attacking.[97]

Behind the front line, Loßberg arrayed strongpoints, machinegun and field gun placements, and garrisons for counter-attacks, which were designed to support the first position. The creation of a new *R-Stellung* several kilometers behind the new front line further strengthened the 3rd Army's new position. These steps, combined with the arrival of the 5th Infantry Division, the 56th Infantry Division, the 20th Infantry Division, and artillery reinforcements over the next several days, created a new defensive system that was far stronger than the original.[98]

By the time Tappen reached Mézières from Pless on 27 September, the immediate crisis had passed and he could record that, "in general, everything is in order."[99] Over the next several weeks, the French continued their attacks, but gained only minor successes against the strengthened positions of the 3rd Army. By 14 October, the French operation which had come so tantalisingly close on the first day to breaking through the German position was over. Falkenhayn's belief in the defensive strength of the *Westheer* proved correct. The *Westheer* had, in fact, survived the initial period with only local reserves. The divisions brought from the east only began to arrive on the Western Front on 5 October.[100] The two attacking French armies had suffered greatly in

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[95] On the French observation difficulties see, Langle de Cary to Joffre, 4th Army Nr.5075, 12 November 1915, in Les Armées Françaises III, Annexes IV, Annexe Nr.3069; Castelnau, op.cit., p.103.
[96] Der Weltkrieg IX, p.97.
[97] AOK 3, Die Champagne-Herbstschlacht, pp. 68-73. Through the course of the battle the 3rd Army fired some 1,564,000 field gun rounds and almost 400,000 heavy artillery rounds. Der Weltkrieg, p.97.
[98] Wynne, op.cit., pp. 90-96; Samuels, op.cit., pp. 168-169.
[99] Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 27 September 1915. By 4 October, Falkenhayn had declared the danger of a French breakthrough to be over. Bethmann to Jagow, AS5157, 4 October 1915, PRO, GFM 34/2587 (Weltkrieg geh. Bd 23).
[100] The XI Army Corps was the first formation from the east to arrive. "Die grossen Transportbewegungen vom Ost- zum Westkriegschauplatze im September/Oktober 1915," (Vorarbeit zu Bd IX), unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/51313.

their efforts to break through the German defensive system, losing close to 150,000 men.[101] The Germans, however, suffered too; the defenders had lost around 17,000 officers and 80,000 men.[102]

Conclusion

With his plans to conclude a separate peace with Russia in tatters, Falkenhayn turned his attention back to the west in early 1915.[103] There, he hoped to salvage the strategy he had outlined in November 1914. Instead of negotiating a peace with Russia, though, the General Staff Chief now wanted to bring France to the peace table. To accomplish this, France would have to be delivered a powerful blow and she would have to be separated from her British ally. Therefore, a solution would have to found to the problem of *Stellungskrieg*. In early 1915, Falkenhayn believed that this solution would be a breakthrough operation.[104]

Accordingly, in early spring of 1915, the OHL began receiving plans from the *Westheer*'s armies for a breakthrough, and had begun to build up a strategic reserve large enough to carry out Falkenhayn's intended offensive. The *Westheer*'s plans, though they chose different areas of the front for the operation were remarkably similar. Each called for powerful forces (over 10 army corps) supported by strong artillery to attack an appropriate area of the enemy's front. Each emphasized the need for surprise and diversionary operations to tie down enemy reserves. By the end of March, the General Staff Chief had a final plan from Hans von Seeckt and Wrisberg's re-organization promised the necessary new divisions. Falkenhayn's preparations came to an abrupt halt, however, when Austria-Hungary's situation necessitated the transfer of substantial German forces to the east.

The experience of the Entente during 1915, however, spoke against the possibility of achieving a meaningful breakthrough under the conditions of the Western Front. Like Falkenhayn, the leaders of the Entente also sought to find a solution to the trench problem. In three great offensives, the Western Allies attempted to breakthrough the German position in France. In the last of these offensives, in the Champagne region in

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[101] Les Armées Françaises III, p.538.
[102] Der Weltkrieg IX, p.97; Loßberg, op.cit., p. 185.
[103] Falkenhayn maintained that, "the war's decision could only fall in the west." Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 16 June 1932, BA/MA, N56/5.

September 1915, the Entente came the closest to achieving their goal. After 3 days of continuous preparatory fire, 19 French divisions, supported by 8 in reserve, attacked 5 German divisions along a 30-km front. By noon of the attack's first day, the greatly out-numbered and severely shaken German troops had been forced out of their first position and into their second. The 3rd Army's command, out of touch with its fighting troops and lacking significant reinforcement, contemplated a general withdrawal. Ultimately cooler heads prevailed, and with the arrival of reinforcements, the 3rd Army was able to hold its secondary positions against renewed French assaults. In the end, this powerful offensive was held at bay.

The French offensive in September made a deep and lasting impression on the General Staff Chief. After the war, Freytag-Loringhoven wrote that Falkenhayn had given his orders with "unshakeable calm" during the first crucial hours of the offensive.[105] Gerhard Tappen painted a different, and probably more accurate, picture. When he arrived from Pless on 27 September, Tappen found Falkenhayn "very dejected." In a letter to the Reichsarchiv, Tappen wrote, "the impression [of the *Herbstschlacht*] was so deep and enduring on General Falkenhayn that he made reference to the battle during the attack on Verdun."[106] Falkenhayn's reaction was brought on by a number of factors. First, his assessment of the Entente had been proved wrong by the power of the attacks on 25 September. His policy of stripping the *Westheer* for troops to use in the east – first in his offensive in Russia, then for his campaign in Serbia – had nearly brought catastrophe to the Germans on the Western Front. The experience brought home forcefully the necessity of maintaining a sufficient reserve to deal with such contingencies. Additionally, as Wilhelm Solger of the Reichsarchiv remarked, the setback in the Champagne came almost a year to the day when Falkenhayn took over as Chief of the General Staff from Helmuth von Moltke under very similar circumstances.[107] This memory must have made the shock of the initial French success all the more jarring.

The impact of the *Herbstschlacht* went beyond the emotional, however; it also had important implications for German plans. Despite possessing vastly superior forces

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[104] The General Staff Chief was convinced this could be accomplished. He told Groener on 24 March that "he expected the war to be over by the time the leaves fall [!]" Groener, Lebenserinnerungen, p.533.
[105] Hugo Freiherr von Freytag-Loringhoven, Menschen und Dinge, wie ich sie in meinem Leben sah (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1923) pp. 288-289.
[106] Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 16 June 1932, BA/MA, N56/5. See also Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.172.
[107] Solger, op.cit. pp. 17-18.

and attacking after an intense 3-day bombardment, the French were unable to achieve a meaningful result. Falkenhayn reached certain conclusions from this. First, the French failures strengthened his belief that their army was a flawed instrument and that it was nearing the end of its strength.[108] More importantly, the events of September had proven to the General Staff Chief that a "mass attack" could not work under the battlefield conditions of late 1915. He later wrote:

> ...the lessons to be deduced from the failure of our enemies' mass attacks are decisive against any imitation of their battle methods. Attempts at a mass break-through, even with the extreme accumulation of men and material, cannot be regarded as holding out the prospects of success...[109]

In short, by the end of the *Herbstschlacht*, Falkenhayn was convinced that a breakthrough was impossible given the conditions prevailing on the Western Front in late 1915.[110] After October 1915, Falkenhayn began to look for another way to win the war in the west, which would ultimately result in his unique strategy in the battle of Verdun in early 1916.

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[108] Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 15 May 1931, BA/MA, N56/5; Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.209.
[109] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, pp. 212-213. (See Chapter 7)
[110] Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 16 June 1932, BA/MA, N56/5 Bl.42-46; Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.174. Pétain reached a similar conclusion, declaring, "The Battle of Champagne demonstrates the difficulty, if not the impossibility of carrying in one thrust successive enemy positions..." Philippe Pétain, "Rapport sur les opérations de la IIe armée et enseignements à en tirer," IIe Armée PC Nr.5668, 1 November 1915, Les Armées Françaises III, Annexes IV, Annexe Nr. 3041, p.168.

Part Three:
Attrition at Work

Introduction

As 1916 began, Erich von Falkenhayn was no closer to achieving the goals he had set out in November 1914. Despite suffering crippling losses in the summer of 1915, Russia had spurned Germany's advances for a separate peace, and the German General Staff Chief had been unable to carry out an offensive in the west aimed at dividing the Western Allies. Consequently, Germany was forced to maintain substantial strength on both fronts and was unable to accumulate sufficient forces to defeat any one enemy in a great "decisive" battle, as pre-war doctrine prescribed.

The war to date had shown that traditional approaches to combat had to be re-thought. The development of trenches across the entire Western Front by late 1914 meant that flank attacks and envelopments, the German army's preferred means of achieving success on the battlefield, could not be carried out. Germany's manpower shortage, combined with the difficult tactical conditions of the World War I battlefield caused Falkenhayn to search for another way of defeating Germany's enemies.

His attempt to find a new strategic and operational means of achieving victory for Germany led to the application of the concept of attrition on the battlefield and to one of the most notorious, and perhaps the least understood, battles of the war – the long drawn-out battle of Verdun. Since its outbreak, Verdun has been spoken of in superlatives. Marshal Philippe Pétain declared, it was at Verdun, "the moral bulwark" of France, that the German advance on France would be stopped.[1] On the German side, Verdun was spoken of as "a beacon light of German valour."[2] At the time, the battle was seen by the French as "... the great test, a purely French affair, since there was only three or four

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[1] Henri Philippe Pétain, Verdun (trans. Margaret MacVeagh) (London: Elkin Mathews & Marrot, 1930) p.15.
[2] Paul von Hindenburg, quoted in Holger Herwig, The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary 1914-1918 (London: Arnold, 1997) p.184.

colonial battalions in it and no British. Verdun, fought with unequal material strength, was almost a victory of the race."[3]

In the years after the war, however, the battle was no longer seen as a "heroic" struggle, but rather as a symbol of the tragic waste of World War I. One historian even described it as "the most senseless episode in a war not distinguished for sense anywhere."[4] During the battle's course, 259 of France's 330 infantry battalions and 48 German divisions were rotated through the "Meuse Mill," as the area was called by the Germans.[5] From this great battle of material, the French and German armies, if not nations, emerged radically altered. As epitomized by the post-war writings of Ernst Jünger, the German soldier had become a new type of soldier, one who was practically fused with technology and who operated as a true fighting "machine." Humanity had been removed from the battlefield.[6] The French victims were spoken of as "the lost children of 1916."[7] As one historian has noted, "for sheer horror no battle surpasses Verdun."[8]

The "sheer horror" of the battle makes any objective historical analysis of its course difficult. Given the vast expenditure of life for seemingly little purpose, it is understandable that the battle's directors, especially those on the German side, chose to obscure their roles in the event. Each attempted, to greater or lesser extent, to shift the blame for the battle's failure to others. Analysis is made all the more difficult by another factor. To ensure secrecy during the planning stages, the chief architect of the battle, Erich von Falkenhayn, ordered that all communication between the OHL and the 5th Army be carried out in person.[9] This fact alone ensured that there are few records from

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[3] Marc Ferro, The Great War, 1914-1918 (London: Routledge, 1995; first published, 1969) p.77.
[4] A.J.P. Taylor, The First World War: An Illustrated History (New York: Perigee Books, 1980; first published, 1963) p.123.
[5] Ferro, op.cit., p.77; AOK 5, "Bezeichnung der Kämpfe seit 21.2.1916," Ia Nr.3953, 25 October 1916, BA/MA, W10/51534.
[6] For example, see Ernst Jünger, The Storm of Steel (London: Chatto & Windus, 1929). Although Jünger was writing about the experience on the Somme, the shift that took place in the soldier's images of themselves began at Verdun. See Bernd Hüppauf, "Langemarck, Verdun and the Myth of a *New Man* in Germany after the First World War," War and Society Vol.6 Nr.2 (1988) pp. 70-103.
[7] Ferro, op.cit., p.76.
[8] Cyril Falls, The First World War (London: Longmans, 1960) p.156.
[9] Kronprinz Wilhelm, Meine Erinnerungen aus Deutschlands Heldenkampf (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1923) p.160; Der Weltkrieg Bd X: Die Operationen des Jahres 1916 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1936) p.28.

which to work. Even the Reichsarchiv ran into this problem when writing the official history.[10]

The only full exposition of Falkenhayn's intentions is his "Christmas Memorandum," reputedly delivered by the General Staff Chief to the Kaiser "around Christmas" 1915. This *Denkschrift*, in which Falkenhayn outlines his strategic plan for winning the war in 1916, was published by him in his memoirs in 1919.[11] However, its authenticity has been repeatedly called into question. When writing the official history, the researchers of the Reichsarchiv were unable to locate a copy of this document in any of the existing army files, nor did any of the others involved in the plan ever admit to reading it.[12] Most recently, Holger Afflerbach has revisited this issue in his biography of Falkenhayn. After examining the evidence surviving in the *Kriegsgeschichtliches Forschungsanstalt* files, he concluded that the "Christmas Memorandum" was in all likelihood written by Falkenhayn after the war. However, he also concluded that it, in fact, reflected many of Falkenhayn's ideas in early 1916.[13]

The confusion created by the lack of documentary evidence has allowed an unusual number of interpretations of Falkenhayn's intentions during the battle. His contemporary critics used the battle as further evidence that Falkenhayn was unfit for high command. They saw it as a demonstration of his inability to make the difficult decisions a true *Feldherr* must. To them, the General Staff Chief's indecisiveness resulted in a strategy of "half-measures" that had no clear objective.[14] A number of historians have also questioned Falkenhayn's ultimate goals. Some believed that the "Christmas Memorandum," with its emphasis on "bleeding the French army white," was in fact created after the war by Falkenhayn as a justification for his failed strategy and

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[10] In 1932, Reichsarchiv researchers complained of this problem to Gerhard Tappen and asked whether he would approach Falkenhayn's widow to gain additional material. "Besprechung mit dem Generalleutnant a.D. Tappen im Reichsarchiv am 6.IX.1932," BA/MA, N56/5, p.1.

[11] Erich von Falkenhayn, The General Staff and Its Critical Decisions, 1914-1916 (London: Hutchinson, 1919) pp. 209-218.

[12] Der Weltkrieg X, p.2. The Reichsarchiv even called in an army psychologist, Dr. Wohlfahrt, to analyse the document, who concluded that the memo was written after the war. BA/MA, W10/50703.

[13] Holger Afflerbach, Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich (Munich: R.Oldenbourg Verlag, 1994) pp. 543-545. See also Wilhelm Groener's similar opinion. Groener to Reichsarchiv, 5 March 1934, BA/MA, W10/50705. (Partially quoted in Afflerbach, p.544.)

[14] This view of Falkenhayn pervades Der Weltkrieg, but was expressed most forcefully by the director of the KGFA, Wolfgang Foerster, in his "Falkenhayns Plan für 1916. Ein Beitrag zur Frage: Wie gelangt man aus dem Stellungskriege zu entscheidungsuchender Operationen?," MWR Jg.1937 H.3 pp. 304-330.

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Chapter 7:
Verdun: The Plan

As 1916 began, the German strategic situation was stable if not favorable. Through the course of 1915, the German armies had advanced deep into Russia and had seemingly crushed the Russian offensive capability. Serbia had been dealt an even heavier blow, as a combined German-Austro-Hungarian-Bulgarian force occupied the country and ejected the remnants of the Serb army from the Continent. The destruction of Serbia opened rail communications with Turkey, thus helping to shore up this beleaguered ally. In Italy and on the Western Front, the Central Powers had warded off powerful Entente offensives and looked likely to be able to hold off any similar attacks for the foreseeable future.

Despite the stable strategic situation, both Falkenhayn and Conrad were in agreement the war would have to be ended by 1917. The two general staff chiefs saw that their nations would soon reach the end of their resources. In early January, Falkenhayn informed Bethmann that "because of our economic and internal political conditions, it is extremely desirable to bring the war to an end before the winter of 1916/17."[1] In an audience with the Kaiser in late January 1916, the General Staff Chief told the assembly that "... time [is] against us. Our allies, Austria and Turkey, [cannot] carry on the war beyond autumn of this year."[2] Conrad expressed similar thoughts, telling Falkenhayn that "the Central Powers cannot take the risk of allowing the war with the well-provided Entente to become a war of exhaustion, rather it must be, the sooner the better, brought to

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[1] Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, diary entry for 7 January 1916, quoted in Karl-Heinz Janßen, Der Kanzler und der General: Die Führungskrise um Bethmann Hollweg und Falkenhayn, 1914-1916 (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1967) p.288. Similar thoughts were expressed by many of Germany's other strategic leaders. See Gerhard Tappen, "Besprechung mit dem Generalleutnant a.D. Tappen im Reichsarchiv am 6.IX.1932," BA/MA, Tappen Nachlass, N56/5, p.5. (Hereafter, Tappen, "Besprechung"); Wilhelm Groener, Lebenserinnerungen (ed. Friedrich Frhr. Hiller von Gaertringen) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1957) (diary entry for 24 December 1915), p.545; Hans von Plessen, "Tagebuch," 3 December 1915, BA/MA, W10/50676. However, Adolf Wild von Hohenborn held a contrary view. He reported to Bethmann in early December 1915, "wir können noch lange, lange Krieg führen!" Adolf Wild von Hohenborn, "Kriegstagebuch," 11 December 1915, BA/MA, Wild Nachlass, N44/2.

a decision through a large-scale action."[3] This being so, both leaders began to plan offensives which they hoped would end the war before the resources of their respective nations ran out.

Falkenhayn had always viewed the Western Front as the decisive theater of war.[4] As Chapter 5 has shown, he was only drawn into an offensive in the east because of Austria-Hungary's desperate situation. With Russia substantially weakened, Falkenhayn now believed he could turn his attentions again to the west without fear of a Russian threat to either eastern Germany or to Austria-Hungary. Thus, while Conrad planned to knock Austria-Hungary's arch-enemy, Italy, out of the war, Falkenhayn in late 1915 turned his attentions back to the Western Front.[5] There, he hoped to take the offensive for the first time since 1914 and force an end to the war.

The Strategic Situation on the Western Front 1915/16

Although several powerful Entente offensives had dented the German lines in the west during the course of 1915, the German position remained largely the same as at the end of 1914. The Western Front still consisted of a trench system that ran unbroken from just south of Ostend in the north to Pfetterhausen on the Swiss border. Behind their respective trenches, 119 German divisions faced 96 French and 43 British divisions. Additionally, each side could draw upon significant reserves. By mid-January 1916, the Germans maintained a reserve of 25 divisions in the west, while the French reserve consisted of 24 divisions and the British of 3.[6]

As Falkenhayn again contemplated a major offensive in the west, the *Nachrichtenabteilung* (N-Abt) of the OHL drew up a number of reports assessing the

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[2] Georg von Müller, The Kaiser and His Court: The Diaries, Note Books and Letters of Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller, Chief of the Naval Cabinet, 1914-1918 (ed. Walter Görlitz) (London: MacDonald, 1961) (diary entry for 24 January 1916), p.129.

[3] Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg 1914-1918 Bd III: Das Kriegsjahr 1915 von der Einnahme von Brest-Litowsk bis zur Jahreswende (Vienna: Verlag der Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen, 1932) pp. 590-591.

[4] Erich von Falkenhayn, General Headquarters and Its Critical Decisions 1914-1916 (London: Hutchinson, 1919) p.24; Hugo von Freytag-Loringhoven, Menschen und Dinge, wie ich sie in meinem Leben sah (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1923) p.284; Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 16 June 1932, BA/MA, N56/5.

[5] This division of effort was much criticized after the war. See Georg Wetzell "Konnte im Jahre 1916 deutscherseits eine Kriegsentscheidung angestrebt werden und war der Gedanke, sie bei Verdun zu suchen, berechtigt?" (Paper presented to at the Reichswehrministerium, 1926) unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/51528; and more recently, Holger Herwig, The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918 (London: Arnold, 1997), pp. 204ff.

manpower available to the Entente armies. In mid-November 1915, they estimated the French army, including the 1916 Class which had not yet reached the front, to be around 3 million men, 500,000 of whom were in replacement depots behind the front. This number was 400,000 less than had been available at the war's outbreak, indicating to the Germans that French strength had peaked. The N-Abt further estimated that, under everyday conditions, the French were losing 70,000 men per month. At this rate of "wastage," German intelligence anticipated that by September 1916 the French would be experiencing severe shortages and would be forced to call up its younger classes earlier and earlier to meet the expected shortfall in manpower.[7] Of course, any offensive action would only speed this process.

Assessing the British strength proved to be somewhat more problematic for the N-Abt, as it lacked a clear picture of the British army's final structure. At the end of November 1915, they reckoned that the British army had a strength of close to 950,000 men, with 270,000 regulars, 400,000 in the Kitchener formations, and 170,000 in Territorial formations. To this number, 60,000 Indians and 47,000 Canadians had to be added. The N-Abt estimated the British would have either 35 ½ or 36 ½ divisions plus 6 cavalry divisions on the Western Front in early 1916. While their report also stated that the British army would eventually reach around 70 divisions, the N-Abt did not know when this would occur or where these divisions would be deployed.[8]

Thus, the Germans faced a numerically superior foe in the west – a strong French army with generally good reserves and a British army which had not yet reached its peak. Added to this numerical superiority of the enemy, the Entente experience in 1915 had shown just how difficult it was to break through a well-constructed defensive system. The Entente had attempted on three separate occasions in 1915 to break through the German defensive lines by employing overwhelming force. Although the lack of ready German reserves almost allowed the French to achieve an operational breakthrough in

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[6] Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg Bd X: Die Operationen des Jahres 1916 bis zum Wechsel in der Obersten Heeresleitung (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1936) pp. 11-12 and pp. 52-53; James B. Edmonds, Military Operations: France and Belgium, 1916 Vol.1 (London: MacMillian & Co, 1932) pp. 18-19.

[7] Nachrichtenabteilung West, Report dated 14 November 1915, quoted in "Die Beurteilung der Kampfkraft der französischen Armee durch die deutsche OHL zwischen dem 1.1 und 29.8.16," BA/MA, W10/51521, p.4. (Hereafter, "Beurteilung I") The N-Abt believed that the 200,000 men of 1917 Class would be used up by September 1916. This meant that the French would be forced to call up their 1918 Class in June 1916 to be ready to meet the shortfall in September.

[8] "Die Beurteilung der Kampfkraft der englischen Armee durch die deutsche OHL. Ende 1915," BA/MA, W10/51521. (Hereafter, "Beurteilung II")

late September 1915, each Entente offensive had merely resulted in high casualties, especially to the attacker, and minor gains in territory.[9] These experiences spoke against the success of a German breakthrough attempt, while the large numbers of Entente reserves ensured that even if the Germans succeeded in breaking through their lines any exploitation would be impossible.

Offsetting the material factors, however, were morale and skill. In early 1915, Falkenhayn judged the French army to be deficient in both these categories and the British to be lacking in the latter, but the German army to possess both in abundance. Indeed, even before the war, Falkenhayn, together with many other German leaders, had judged the French harshly, believing France to be a nation in decline.[10] As early as June 1915, he reported to the Chancellor that France did not have the necessary will to continue the war for much longer and that France was nearing the end of its resources.[11] In September, Falkenhayn told the Kaiser that "... the French are at the end of their strength and in no condition to attack."[12] The utter failure of the French offensives in 1915 only served to reinforce his low estimation of the French and his high evaluation of the German soldier. Although after the war Falkenhayn was criticized for this underestimation of the French,[13] his opinion was shared by others in the German high command at the time. In early December 1915, Adolph Wild von Hohenborn characterised the French as "weak."[14] Gerhard Tappen wrote after the war of the prevalent belief in the OHL in early 1916, "... the worth of the individual German soldier was so much greater than the enemy that numbers alone could not be decisive."[15]

Falkenhayn's evaluation of the quality of French troops was supported by the N-Abt. Many French deserters spoke of the war-weariness of the French soldiers and

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[9] During the *Herbstschlacht* in 1915, the French suffered around 250,000 casualties and the Germans around 150,000. Peter Graf von Kielmannsegg, Deutschland und der Erste Weltkrieg (Frankfurt: Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft Athenaion, 1968) p.97.

[10] Holger Afflerbach, Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich (Munich: R.Oldenbourg Verlag, 1994) pp. 68-71; Tappen later said, "wir hatten uns im Frieden immer gesagt, dass die Franzosen keine Reserven hätten, um ihre Lücken auszufüllen." Tappen, "Besprechung," p.18.

[11] Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg Bd.VIII: Die Operationen des Jahres 1915: Die Ereignisse im Westen im Frühjahr und Summer, im Osten vom Frühjahr bis zum Jahresschluss (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1932) pp. 609-610. See Chapter 6, p.149.

[12] Quoted in Wilhelm Solger, "Die Leitung des deutschen Westheeres im September und Oktober 1915 seit dem Beginn der Herbstschlacht in der Champagne und im Artois," unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/51353, p.1.

[13] Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, Betrachtungen zum Weltkriege Vol.2 (Berlin: Reimar Hobbing, 1921) p.42; Groener to Reichsarchiv, 5 March 1934, BA/MA, W10/51523; Afflerbach, op.cit., p.358.

[14] Wild, "Kriegstagebuch," 11 December 1915.

[15] Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 15 May 1931, N56/5.

particularly of the adverse affect on French morale of the failure of and the high casualties suffered during the offensives in September/October 1915.[16] Agent reports also spoke of a shortfall of junior officers in the front line.[17] Further, when the French began instituting a defense in depth and leaving their first trench line only lightly defended, the N-Abt interpreted this to mean that the French command feared that their troops would break under German *Trommelfeuer*.[18] Therefore, like Falkenhayn, the N-Abt saw the French army as a numerically strong force, but one with serious internal weaknesses.

The British, on the other hand, were seen to have an army with high morale – the lack of deserters attested to this – but for the most part with limited combat value. The N-Abt divided its assessment into three categories to correspond with the three parts of the British army in late 1915. The Germans believed that the pre-war army had been largely destroyed, but that it had provided the necessary cadres to form the backbone of several new "regular" divisions. These divisions were seen as "*ein vollwertiger Gegner*." The N-Abt evaluated the Territorial divisions similarly. These two groups, however, made up less than half of the British divisions in France (14 ½ of 36). The remainder were the so-called "Kitchener Divisions." The Germans evaluated the combat ability of these formations much lower than the rest of the army.[19] Their lack of experienced officers and combat experience meant that the Germans judged them, for the immediate future at least, incapable of effective offensive action. They concluded that, "the British army at the end of 1915 still makes an unfinished impression."[20]

Thus, of the two main enemy armies on the Western Front at the end of 1915, the French appeared the weaker to the Germans. Although the French army possessed sufficient reserves to last through normal operations in 1916, it was clearly at the peak of

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[16] "Beurteilung I," pp. 8-9. Karl von Einem reckoned that the French had taken 97,000 casualties during the *Herbstschlacht* in the Champagne as compared to 37,000 German casualties. Karl von Einem, "Tagebuch," 3 October 1915, BA/MA, N324/12.

[17] Agent "17," Report of 5 December 1915, in "Beurteilung I," p.7. "Agent 17," in reality the Austrian Baron August Schluga, had begun working for German intelligence in 1866. From then until his death in 1916, he had served the Germans well, obtaining details of the French deployment plan before the war and important intelligence during the war. See David Kahn, Hitler's Spies (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1978) pp. 32-35. My thanks to James Beach for bringing this information to my attention.

[18] Nachrichtenabteilung West, "Verteilung der französischen und englischen Infanterie und Maschinengewehre an der Kampffront," 26 January 1916, BA/MA, W10/51543.

[19] The experience of fighting against the British in Artois reinforced this belief. The Germans believed that the Kitchener divisions had such a limited combat capability that "generals had to lead assaults personally." Falkenhayn lost a friend from China in this way. Bethmann to Jagow, 4 October 1915, AS5157, PRO, GFM 34/2587 (Weltkrieg geh. Bd 23).

[20] AOK 4, "Die englische Armee," 19 October 1915, in "Beurteilung II," pp. 7-8.

its strength.[21] The 1917 Class was called up in late 1915, to be ready for service at the front in mid 1916.[22] After this class was exhausted, the French would be forced to call up its younger classes earlier than expected. Further, evidence pointed to a French army with much diminished morale due to the length of the war and the failure of its own offensives the preceding year. Falkenhayn also assumed that the French government and people did not have the necessary willpower to continue to accept the high level of casualties which occurred in any offensive action in *Stellungskrieg*. These beliefs would play a central role in Falkenhayn's strategy for 1916.

Falkenhayn's Strategic Plans

Falkenhayn faced a challenging strategic problem at the end of 1915. Although he assumed Russia would be incapable of offensive action for the foreseeable future, Russia had not been knocked from the war.[23] Germany still needed to maintain significant forces in the east to protect against any possible Russian action, however small.[24] Therefore, Falkenhayn could only count on a 25-26 division reserve in the west.[25] In France, he faced two enemies, who each possessed large reserves and who were each firmly ensconced behind well-constructed trenches. The General Staff Chief had to determine where and how to launch an attack with limited resources which would decide the war in 1916. Through December 1915 and January 1916, he developed his final ideas.

Although Falkenhayn believed Great Britain to be Germany's main enemy, Britain was the more difficult to defeat. Falkenhayn felt that they occupied a defensive position on the Continent which could not be assailed with the forces at Germany's disposal. (The British sector had one of the highest concentrations of troops anywhere on the front.) Further, he believed that even if Germany were to deal the British force on the Continent a powerful blow, this would not force Britain from the war. Such an offensive would leave Britain herself largely unharmed and would leave the army of her French

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[21] Indeed, the same could be said of the German army. Manpower shortages meant that Falkenhayn believed no further formations could be raised. Falkenhayn, op.cit., p.226.
[22] "Beurteilung I," p.5.
[23] In early January 1916, Falkenhayn reported to Bethmann that the Russian army was incapable of any "large-scale offensive" for the immediate future. Bethmann, diary entry for 7 January 1916, in Janßen, op.cit., p.288.
[24] The *Ostheer*, excluding the 11th Army in the Balkans, consisted of 47 ½ divisions in February 1916. Der Weltkrieg X, p.427.
[25] This number was deemed insufficient for a breakthrough even in early 1915. (See Chapter 6.) This belief, however, was not shared by Falkenhayn's close advisor, Wild, who believed a reserve of 24 divisions was sufficient to launch a major offensive in the west. Wild, "Kriegstagebuch," 11 December 1915.

ally wholly intact. Despite these difficulties, Falkenhayn felt that Germany's goal in 1916 should be to convince Britain that she could never defeat Germany. In order to accomplish this, he planned to strike Britain directly by unleashing unrestricted submarine warfare against British shipping and, more importantly, by knocking "England's best sword" out of her hand – France.[26]

Therefore, in order to conclude the war in 1916, Falkenhayn returned to an idea from the summer campaign in Russia – to force an end to the war by compelling one enemy into a separate peace.[27] Here again Falkenhayn faced a difficulty. In order for France to be forced into peace with Germany, her army would first have to be destroyed, or at least seriously weakened. Although the OHL felt that the French had severe internal weaknesses, they still held two advantages – sizeable reserves and a strong position in the field.

The course of the war in the west to date had shown the difficulties of conducting an operationally successful breakthrough against an enemy with strong reserves. In his "Christmas Memorandum," Falkenhayn wrote,

> ... the lessons to be deduced from the failure of our enemies' mass attacks are decisive against any imitation of their methods. Attempts at a mass break-through, even with an extreme accumulation of men and material, cannot be regarded as holding out prospects of success against a well armed enemy, whose *moral* is sound and who is not seriously inferior in numbers. The defender has usually succeeded in closing the gaps. This is easy enough for him if he decides to withdraw voluntarily....The salients thus made, enormously exposed to the effects of flanking fire, threatened to become a mere slaughter-house. The technical difficulties of directing and supplying the masses bottled up in them are so great as to seem practically insurmountable.[28]

In late 1915, Falkenhayn clearly believed that the Germans would be unable to destroy the French army through conventional means. Therefore, another method had to be found. This "new way" would combine lessons from the war to date and would incorporate some unique strategic and operational concepts. Indeed, a former member of

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[26] Falkenhayn, op.cit., pp. 212-217; Groener to Reichsarchiv, 5 March 1934, BA/MA, W10/51523. Space prevents a detailed discussion of the debate over the U-boat campaign. For a recent overview see, Afflerbach, op.cit., pp. 376-404.

[27] For German diplomatic moves towards France in 1916, see Fritz Fischer, Germany's Aims in the First World War (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1967) pp. 224-228; L.L. Farrar, Jr., "Peace Through Exhaustion: German Diplomatic Motivations for the Verdun Campaign," Revue Internationale d'Histoire Militaire 32 (1972-1975) pp. 477-494.

[28] Falkenhayn, op.cit., pp. 212-213; Groener to Reichsarchiv, 5 March 1934, BA/MA, W10/51523. Falkenhayn stressed repeatedly before Verdun the impossibility of a mass attack. See below.

his staff later wrote that he could "find no analogue" in military history for the General Staff Chief's singular approach.[29]

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Falkenhayn had begun to turn his gaze westwards even before the conclusion of operations in the east. In mid-November, he gave to the 5th Army the task of planning several offensives, from which would ultimately spring the "Angriff im Maasgebiet," or the Battle of Verdun. His original concept was to carry out three separate limited offensives: the main undertaking, Operation "Schwarzwald," in Upper Alsace (Belfort); and two secondary operations, "Waldfest," in the Argonne (Verdun) and "Kaiserstuhl," in the Vosges. Falkenhayn left the goals of these operations temporarily open.[30]

On 3 December, Falkenhayn apprised the Kaiser of the state of planning on these operations and sought his approval for their go ahead. At this audience, the first strands of Falkenhayn's "new method" began to emerge. *Generaloberst* Hans von Plessen recorded the meeting in his diary:

> General von Falkenhayn entrollt S.M. ein ernstes Bild von der Kriegslage mit dem Schluss, dass zur Herbeiführung einer Entscheidung ein Schlag im *Westen* geführt werden muss, wozu *alle* verfügbaren Kräfte bereit zu stellen sind! Er will Belfort angreifen, weil er da die beste Flankenanlehnung hat .... So gewinnt die Friedensaussischt sehr, sehr lang aussehende Allüren, es sei denn, dass die Entente uns im Westen angreift und sich dabei verblutet.[31]

Although his ideas were not clearly defined in early December, Plessen's diary entry indicates that by this point Falkenhayn had contrived the notion that the French must be forced to attack German positions, thereby suffering high casualties. He intended that the attack on Belfort, supported by smaller attacks elsewhere along the front, to threaten the

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[29] Groener to Reichsarchiv, 5 March 1934, BA/MA, W10/51523. See also Jehuda Wallach, The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation (Westport, CT: Greedwood Press, 1986) p.170.

[30] Wilhelm Solger, "Die OHL in der Führung der Westoperationen Ende 1915 bis Ende August 1916: I. Vom 3.XII.15 – 8.I.16. Die Entstehung des Operationsplanes," unpublished manuscript, BA/MA, W10/51318, pp. 2-12. (Hereafter, Solger, "Entstehung.")

[31] Plessen, "Tagebuch," 3 December 1915. Emphasis in original. This seems to be the first use of the word "verbluten" in Falkenhayn's strategic plans. See Solger, "Entstehung," p.7; Afflerbach, op.cit., p.364. Cf. Gerd Krumeich, "'Saigner la France'? Mythes et réalité de la stratégie allemande de la bataille de Verdun," Guerres mondiale et conflits contemporains Nr.182 (April 1996) p.25, who claims the concept only originated after the initial failure of the battle.

French in such a way as to cause them to respond immediately with a counter-attack.[32] Contrary to post-war interpretation, this evidence demonstrates that the ultimate goal of these operations was the *Verblutung*, or bleeding to death, of the French army.[33] This idea was to become more clearly defined as the planning process continued.

Both Falkenhayn and *Generalleutnant* Constantin Schmidt von Knobelsdorf, the Chief of Staff of the 5th Army, soon began to have doubts as to the suitability of these plans, however. An operation against Belfort had its difficulties. First, it was far from the main areas of fighting and, hence, poorly serviced by rail lines. Second, Falkenhayn feared operations would be constricted by the proximity to the Swiss border.[34] Further, in the pre-war period, it had been agreed that in the case of war, the Italians would serve in Upper Alsace. In March 1914, the German and Italian General Staffs worked out a plan for the Italian forces to assault and take Belfort. Tappen believed that these plans must surely be in French hands by December 1915.[35] Knobelsdorf also raised objections to Operation "Waldfest." He felt it lacked the forces necessary to threaten seriously the fortress of Verdun, which he believed should be the main result of the attack.[36] Most important, though, both men concluded that these operations would not result in the desired psychological effect, which was deemed necessary to cause the French to launch an immediate counter-attack.

Accordingly, Falkenhayn began to consider an operation elsewhere. On 8 December, he had a long discussion with Tappen and Wild about the situation. Although no decision had been made, the General Staff Chief was clearly leaning towards scrapping the offensive against Belfort in favor of one against Verdun. An operation against Verdun had advantages. First, the area was well-serviced by rail lines. Second,

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[32] Falkenhayn's intentions in early December were repeated by the Kaiser in an interview with a Reichsarchiv researcher after the war. Alfred Niemann, "Bericht über den Vortrag, den S.M. der Kaiser am 25.Februar 1934 von mir entgegengenommen hat," BA/MA, W10/51523, pp. 1-2. (Hereafter, Niemann, "Kaiser Vortrag"). See also Tappen, "Besprechung," p.5.

[33] Wolfgang Foerster, "Falkenhayns Plan für 1916. Ein Beitrag zur Frage: Wie gelangt man aus dem Stellungskrieg zu entscheidungsuchender Operation?" MWR Jg.1937 pp. 303-330; Gerd Krumeich, "'Saigner la France'? Mythes et réalité de la stratégie allemande de la bataille de Verdun," Guerres mondiale et conflits contemporains Nr.182 (April 1996) p.25, both of whom claim that the concept only originated after the initial failure of the battle.

[34] Erich von Luckwald to Bethmann, 17 February 1916, (copied from Reichskanzlei. Weltkrieg 1914/18. 15.Allg. Milit.- und Marine Berichte aus dem Gr.H.Qu. Bd.1) BA/MA, W10/51543. Luckwald was the Auswärtiges Amt representative at the OHL.

[35] Tappen, "Besprechung," p.5.

[36] Knobelsdorf to Falkenhayn (personal letter), 3 December 1915. Reprinted in Hermann Wendt, Verdun 1916. Die Angriffe Falkenhayns im Maasgebiet mit Richtung auf Verdun als strategisches Problem (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1931) p.226.

the fortress of Verdun sat in the center of a salient, which could be dominated by German guns. Wild recorded in his diary the advantages this would give: "During an attack from the north and the east, the [French] positions will soon be so diminished that not even a mouse can live in them."[37] Most importantly, Verdun was an object "... for the retention of which the French General Staff would be compelled to throw in every man they have."[38] On the day after his discussion with Tappen and Wild, Falkenhayn ordered Knobelsdorf to Berlin for discussion concerning the impending offensive. Falkenhayn asked him to come prepared to discuss turning "Waldfest" into a major operation.[39]

Knobelsdorf arrived in Berlin on 14 December with a plan to attack the French salient at Verdun and to take the fortress. The 5th Army envisioned an attack along the front from Four de Paris (southwest of Varennes) to Ornes (i.e., an attack along both banks of the Meuse). They hoped to put the 5th Army in a position to dominate the fortress of Verdun with heavy artillery, making it unusable by the French.[40] Knobelsdorf recorded in the 5th Army's *Kriegstagebuch* Falkenhayn's response to their plan:

> Da OHL nach Prüfung der zur Verfügung stehenden Mittel nicht genügend Kräfte zur Verfügung stellen kann, um den Angriff wie von Armeechef geplant von Norden, Nordwesten, Nordosten gleichzeitig zu machen, entscheidet sich Armeechef für Angriff beginnend bei V.R.K. und dann folgend. Die zu erreichende Linie bleibt in beiden Fällen die gleiche.[41]

Thus, although the General Staff Chief believed that Knobelsdorf's initial plan required too much strength (23 divisions), on 15 December, the decision was taken to scrap plans to attack Belfort and concentrate instead on an offensive against Verdun.[42] Falkenhayn promised Knobelsdorf five army corps from the OHL reserve for the operation and set

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[37] Wild, "Kriegstagebuch," 11 December 1915. See also Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 8 December 1915.
[38] Falkenhayn, op.cit., p.217. Knobelsdorf recognized that by attacking Verdun, they would have to reckon with "at least half the French army." Knobelsdorf to Ziese-Beringer, 6 March 1933, printed in Hermann Ziese-Beringer, Der einsame Feldherr: Die Wahrheit über Verdun (2 vols) (Berlin: Frundsberg-Verlag, 1933), vol. II, pp. 200-201.
[39] OHL to AOK 5, 9 December 1915, quoted in Solger, "Entstehung," pp. 15-17.
[40] This plan had been developed by the 5th Army in October. Marginal comment by Knobelsdorf to Solger, "Entstehung," p.23.
[41] AOK 5, "Kriegstagebuch," 16 December 1915, BA/MA, W10/51318.
[42] The exact date on which the Kaiser was informed of the change of plans has never been clear. Based on the Kaiser's post-war testimony, the Reichsarchiv concluded that Falkenhayn had informed the Kaiser of his changing plans between 10 and 12 December, i.e. before Falkenhayn's meeting with Knobelsdorf. However, it is clear that the Kaiser was well informed about Falkenhayn's intentions, even if he never read a "Christmas Memorandum." Der Weltkrieg X, p.25. See also Niemann, "Kaiser Vortrag," p.2; Afflerbach, op.cit., p.365.

the start date for the "beginning of February." Against the wishes of the 5th Army, he restricted the initial attack to the east bank of the Meuse only.[43]

Falkenhayn hoped that the 5th Army's attack on Verdun would either seize the fortress quickly or that the threat to the fortress would cause the French to send all their reserves to hold it.[44] In a meeting with the chiefs of staff of the *Westheer*, he outlined the likely Entente responses to the attack:

> 1) Sie [the French high command] halten Verdun für so vorzüglich verteidigt, dass sie alles lassen, wie es steht. Sehr günstig für uns, daher unwahrscheinlich.
> 2) Sie ziehen alle verfügbaren Kräfte dorthin....
> 3) Französische Gegenoffensive an anderen Stellen. Wahrscheinlich am selben Punkte wie früher, Artois, Champagne, Woewre, Ober-Elsass. Mit Freude begrüssen. OHL hält sich versichert, dass alle Angriffe scheitern, Franzosen schwere Verluste.
> 4) Versuch, Verdun mit allen Kräften zu halten, Engländer zum Angriff veranlassen. Fraglich ob ihnen das gelingt, zumal augenblicklich grosse Umwälzungen in englischer Armee, Einschieben der Kitchener-Truppen, Vermischen mit den alten Verbänden bis in die Bataillone.[45]

According to the post-war testimony of both Tappen and Kaiser Wilhelm II, Falkenhayn believed the fourth possibility to be the most likely: The attack would cause the French to send all their reserves and to strip units from their front line to support Verdun. Thus, by seizing or by threatening to seize such a vital point in the French line, the Germans could deal quickly with the entire French reserve, binding them in the Verdun salient where they would exhaust themselves in fruitless attacks against the German positions supported by powerful artillery.[46] In response to this situation, the British would be forced to launch an offensive designed to relieve the French before their army was ready, thereby, like the French, wearing themselves down.[47]

Thus, the Germans could reach an operationally favorable position without relying on a "mass attack." By attacking such a sensitive point in the French line, which

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[43] AOK 5, "Kriegstagebuch," 16 December 1915, BA/MA, W10/51318.
[44] For Falkenhayn's intentions regarding the taking of Verdun, see below.
[45] AOK 7, "Kriegstagebuch," 11 February 1916, quoted in Wilhelm Solger, "Die OHL in der Führung der Westoperationen Ende 1915 bis Ende August 1916: II. Vom 9.1.16 – 21.II.16. Die Vorbereitung des Angriffs auf Verdun und die Weitergestaltung der damit in Verbindung stehenden Operationsgedanken," unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/51529, pp. 112-113 (Hereafter, Solger, "Vorbereitung") See also Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 39-40.
[46] Niemann, "Kaiser Vortrag," p.3; As Tappen said after the war, "wir waren der Meinung, dass der Feind bei seinen Gegenangriffen im Feuer unserer gewaltigen schweren Artillerie, die ihn schon bei unserem Angriffe hart mitgenommen haben musste, ausserordentliche Verluste haben würde." Tappen, "Besprechung," p.13; Afflerbach, op.cit., p.363f.
[47] Hermann von Kuhl to Reichsarchiv, 28 October 1932, BA/MA, W10/51318.

had the added advantage of being dominated by German guns, Falkenhayn did not need to resort to employing the "mass tactics," which had proved so costly and so ineffective for the Entente. The operations of the war to date, especially the *Herbstschlacht*, had shown the devastating effect of German artillery. Therefore, Falkenhayn intended the heavy artillery to carry the burden in this battle. In effect, the enemy would "bleed himself white" by counter-attacking into the German positions supported by heavy artillery. All the General Staff Chief needed to do was retain sufficient forces to reinforce any threatened point of the German front and to retain adequate reserves to carry out his own counter-offensive to mob up the remnants of the enemy armies once the Entente strength had been broken as a result of their offensive action. This was summed up by Tappen: "Das Maasangriff blieb immer noch Ausgangspunkt für die gesuchte Kriegsentscheidung im Gegenstoss."[48]

Falkenhayn had found his "new way." His strategy for winning the war in 1916 would consist of two phases. First, the operation at Verdun would result in the removal of the French, and hopefully the British, reserves. This would create the conditions necessary for the second phase. Once the Entente reserves had been worn down, the German army would fall on the now weakened Entente front. This offensive would destroy once and for all the weakened French army, forcing France from the war and pushing the British army from the Continent.[49]

Several points were crucial to this plan's success. First, the Germans had to retain sufficient reserves to meet the expected Entente relief offensives. Second, they had to keep sufficient forces to launch a German counter-offensive once the Entente forces had worn themselves out in their relief offensives. This pressure influenced greatly Falkenhayn's plans for the conduct of the first phase of his strategy – Operation "Gericht." And finally, Falkenhayn's plan for 1916 relied upon the enemy doing exactly what Falkenhayn wanted.

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[48] Tappen to Reichsarchiv, comments to RA Nr.45, 18 October 1934, BA/MA, N56/5.

[49] In keeping with their ideas of *Vernichtungsstrategie*, the Reichsarchiv assumed that Falkenhayn intended the war's decision to come from this counter-stroke. However, this second attack was meant to clear up a foe who had already defeated himself with his own attacks, rather than to be "decisive" itself. See Der Weltkrieg X, p.671f.; Foerster, op.cit., pp. 319- 322. Cf. Afflerbach, op.cit., p.357; and Wendt, op.cit., pp. 43ff.

Plans for the First Phase

On 6 January, the 5th Army submitted its plan of attack to the OHL. It began: "The decision to take the fortress of Verdun in an expeditious manner rests on the proven ability of the heavy and heaviest artillery." In keeping with their instructions from the OHL, the 5th Army planned initially to attack only the French positions upon the east bank of the Meuse, stating, "whoever possesses the Côtes ... on the east bank, as well as the positions upon those heights, is also in possession of the fortress." They envisioned reaching the line Froide Terre – Fort Souville – Fort Tavannes.[50] From these heights, they believed it would be possible to suppress the French positions on the west bank using artillery fire. The *Angriffsentwurf* called for the initial assault to be carried out by three army corps, which would be joined by two additional corps as the attack developed.

Contrary to Falkenhayn's wishes, however, the plan also called for an attack on the west bank following on the heels of the initial assault on the east. The 5th Army claimed that only after the taking of the west bank would Verdun be completely neutralized. They planned for the VI Corps, reinforced by an additional corps, to advance "soon after the attack on the east bank has started." As a final goal for the offensives on both banks, the 5th Army envisioned flattening the Verdun salient, in effect, seizing the fortress.[51]

This attack along both banks of the Meuse was central to the 5th Army's plan to take the fortress of Verdun, or at least to take the heights dominating the fortress. Even before Knobelsdorf had left Berlin on 16 December, tensions between the desires of the 5th Army and Falkenhayn over this had developed. At their meeting, Knobelsdorf had spoken firmly for an attack along both banks. He feared that the French artillery on the heights of the west bank would be able to fire into the flank of the German attack as it progressed.[52] Similar fears were held by almost everyone else involved in planning the offensive.[53] In late January, *Oberst* Max Bauer, the heavy artillery specialist in the OHL, travelled to the 5th Army's front to check upon the attack preparations. He too returned to

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[50] See also Der Weltkrieg X, p.121.
[51] AOK 5, "Angriffsentwurf," Nr.78, 4 January 1916, BA/MA, W10/51526; reprinted in Ziese-Beringer II, pp. 197-200; Kronprinz Wilhelm, op.cit., pp. 161-164.
[52] AOK 5, "Kriegstagebuch," 16 December 1915, BA/MA, W10/51318.
[53] Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 9 February 1934, BA/MA, N56/5; Wild, "Kriegstagebuch," 23 February 1916; Gerhard von Heymann (former Ia of the 5th Army) to Reichsarchiv, 28 August 1935, BA/MA, W10/51523; Der Weltkrieg X, p.27.

Mézières convinced that the attack on Verdun would only succeed if launched simultaneously on both banks and tried to change Falkenhayn's mind on the matter.[54]

Falkenhayn, however, refused to consider a simultaneous attack along both banks.[55] First, he believed that Germany did not have the necessary manpower to undertake a large-scale offensive. He feared that when the anticipated Entente relief offensive came, the OHL would not have sufficient reserves to hold the line.[56] When pressed to widen the Verdun offensive to the west bank as well, Falkenhayn expressed this fear to Tappen: "I am responsible. I do not want to come to the same dangerous situation as in the autumn [of 1915] during the battle in the Champagne. I will not allow that to happen again."[57] Additionally, as we have seen, Falkenhayn had concluded from the experience of 1915 that a "mass attack" could not succeed under the conditions prevalent on the Western Front. To attack with too large a force would only repeat the same mistakes of the Entente.[58]

Despite these reservations, Falkenhayn approved the 5th Army's plan of 4 January, seemingly giving in to the 5th Army's desires. As Hermann Wendt has noted, however, he reserved for himself the final word as to how the offensive would progress. Falkenhayn agreed to provide the 5th Army with the additional forces necessary to widen their assault to include the west bank – the X Reserve Corps for the attack on the west bank and the XXII Reserve Corps for an attack by *Armeeabteilung Strantz*. However, he only agreed to send them "in good time."[59] Shortly before the offensive was to begin, Falkenhayn informed the 5th Army that the two promised corps would remain in the OHL reserve until he saw fit to release them for further operations. The X Reserve Corps, wrote Falkenhayn, "... has to remain in the sector of the 3rd Army in case of an enemy counter-attack in the Champagne, which is by no means unlikely ..."[60] The XXII Reserve

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[54] Max Bauer, Der grosse Krieg in Feld und Heimat (Tübingen: Osiander'sche Buchhandlung, 1921) p.101; Marginal comments by Knobelsdorf to Solger, "Entstehung," p.24.

[55] Despite Falkenhayn's clear refusal, Knobelsdorf began planning for an attack on the west bank immediately upon his return to Stenay. Untitled and unpublished manuscript on the attack on the west bank of the Meuse in BA/MA, W10/51526, p.5 (Hereafter, "Angriff auf dem Westufer")

[56] OHL to AOK 5, Nr. 22662 op., 28 January 1916, printed in Wendt, op.cit., pp. 35-36. See also, Hermann Geyer to Reichsarchiv, 27 December 1934, BA/MA, Geyer Nachlass, N221/25.

[57] Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 9 February 1934, BA/MA, N56/5.

[58] In a meeting to discuss future offensives on 3 February, Falkenhayn told Conrad that "a limited number of troops, correctly employed, holds out the prospect of success." k.u.k. Oberst Kundmann, diary entry for 3 February 1916, quoted in Solger, "Vorbereitung," p.86.

[59] Wendt, op.cit., p.34; Wallach, op.cit., p.175.

[60] OHL to AOK 5, Nr. 22662 op., 28 January 1916, printed in Wendt, op.cit., pp. 35-36.

Corps was also held in reserve for the time being, "in consideration of the general situation on the Western Front."[61]

The 5th Army's plan also implied that they envisioned a rapid capitulation of the fortress of Verdun. At first glance, this goal seems at odds with Falkenhayn's idea of "bleeding white" the French army and that the 5th Army did not understand this idea fully.[62] After all, this *Verblutung* would presumably take considerable time and involve hard fighting. A rapid capitulation of the fortress would hardly bring this about. However, Falkenhayn's goals for the first phase of his strategy were quite subtle. Although he repeatedly stressed the capture of Verdun was not his aim, a fall of the fortress would not be unwelcome.[63] The General Staff Chief wanted to destroy the French reserves. He envisioned this happening through a successful German defense of a French counter-attack. As we have seen, he was unsure if this counter-attack would come at Verdun or elsewhere on the front.

Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that Falkenhayn believed this goal would be reached quickly as long as the 5th Army reached a position from which its heavy artillery could dominate the French counter-attacks. First, he planned to launch his "decisive" counter-attack against a greatly weakened Entente front "around the middle of February."[64] Hermann von Kuhl took this to mean that Falkenhayn believed that the French would be forced by the German conquest of Verdun to send all their available forces to retake the fortress and, thereby, the enemy forces elsewhere on the Western Front would be considerably weakened.[65] Second, in a meeting with Conrad on 3 February, the German General Staff Chief expressed the belief that a decision would be reached shortly after the start of the offensive. According to the diary of an Austrian staff officer present at the meeting, Falkenhayn told Conrad: "The operation against France could bring a decision in 14 days."[66]

There is, however, no denying the evident tensions between Falkenhayn's vision of events and that of the 5th Army. Although Knobelsdorf's post-war statement that he

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[61] OHL to AOK 5, Nr. 22987 op., 4 February 1916, printed in Wend, op.cit., p.36. The XXII RK was in reserve in behind the 6th Army's sector, an area where Falkenhayn felt an Entente relief offensive was likely to fall.

[62] See especially, Wendt, op.cit., pp. 31-34.

[63] Falkenhayn, op. cit., pp. 217-218; Freytag-Loringhoven, op.cit., p.291; Tappen to Hermann Wendt, 10 July 1919, BA/MA, N56/4, Bl.224.

[64] Hermann von Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 11 January 1916, BA/MA, W10/50652.

[65] Kuhl to Reichsarchiv, 7 January 1934, BA/MA, W10/51523.

[66] k.u.k. Oberst Kundmann, diary entry for 3 February 1916, quoted in Solger, "Vorbereitung," p.87.

would not have carried out the offensive had he known Falkenhayn's real desires is disingenuous,[67] the 5th Army was at least uncomfortable with the General Staff Chief's goal of "bleeding white the French army." Kronprinz Wilhelm later wrote:

> Was mich beunruhigte, war der mehrfach ausgesprochene Gedanke des Chefs des Generalstabes des Feldheeres, dass es darauf ankomme, Frankreichs Heer bei Verdun "zum Ausbluten" zu bringen, gleichgültig, ob die Festung dabei falle oder nicht.[68]

The goals of the 5th Army were different from those of Falkenhayn. They believed the fortress could and should be taken and aimed for this at all stages of the offensive. As we shall see, this difference of opinion would have important consequences as the battle wore on.

Plans for the Second Phase

The day Falkenhayn received the 5th Army's initial plan, he set in motion the planning for his strategy's second phase – the final counter-attack. On 6 January 1916, Falkenhayn ordered the Chief of Staff of the 6th Army, *Generalleutnant* Hermann von Kuhl, to Berlin for a meeting. The two men met in the Ministry of War building on 8 January.[69] According to Kuhl's diary, Falkenhayn posed to him the question: "Can we carry out a large-scale offensive in the area of the 6th Army, and what forces would be necessary for such an operation?" Kuhl had an answer ready: The 6th Army proposed to carry out an attack "in the general direction of Albert, with the left wing of the 6th Army and the right wing of the 2nd Army," with the goal of rolling up the flank of the British forces. Twelve army corps would be necessary to carry out the offensive.[70] Like every other offensive proposal requiring such forces, Falkenhayn refused Kuhl's plan, again

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[67] Alistair Horne, The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916 (London: Penguin Books, 1993, originally published 1962) p.40. After the war, Knobelsdorf attempted to distance himself from the failure of the Verdun undertaking by claiming that he was not fully informed about Falkenhayn's goals for the offensive. (See for instance, Knobelsdorf to Ziese-Beringer, 6 March 1933, in Ziese-Beringer II, p.200 and Knobelsdorf to Reichsarchiv, 6 January 1934, BA/MA, W10/50705) It is clear, however, that the 5th Army knew that Falkenhayn's goal was the "bleeding white" of the French army and, indeed, propigated it even if they did not agree completely with the policy. See Berthold von Deimling, Aus der alten in die neue Zeit (Berlin: Im Verlag Ullstein, 1930) p. 209, for Knobelsdorf's instructions to the XV Army Corps before the battle. This also disproves Wallach's claim that Falkenhayn did not reveal his true intentions to his subordinates. See Wallach, op.cit., p.174.

[68] Kronprinz Wilhelm, op.cit., p.160. This passage was mistranslated by Horne. Horne, op.cit., p.38.

[69] Despite giving up his position as Minister of War in January 1915, Falkenhayn retained his residence at the Ministry of War until December 1916. See Kriegsministerium Unterkunfts-Dept. to Falkenhayn, 6 December 1916, Nr.2597/11 16U1, Falkenhayn Nachlass (N2088), BA-Lichterfelde.

declaring it would require more resources than Germany possessed. Instead, he asked Kuhl to return to Douai and prepare a plan which would involve an attack with 8 divisions and around 20 heavy batteries. He told Kuhl to expect an enemy much weakened by the forthcoming offensive at Verdun and the Entente relief offensives which were sure to follow.[71] The General Staff Chief hoped that this offensive by the 6th Army would "restore life to the solidified front" and would bring *Bewegungskrieg* once again to the Western Front.[72] The 6th Army should be ready to begin this more limited offensive "around the middle of February."

On 27 January, the 6th Army's new proposal for an offensive arrived at Mézières. The *Denkschrift* began inauspiciously by questioning Falkenhayn's assumption that the Entente would attack the 6th Army suddenly. Kuhl noted that each previous Entente offensive had taken place only after careful, prolonged preparation. Further, the *Denkschrift* pointed out that the British forces were still in the process of building their army. Consequently, the 6th Army was of the opinion that an enemy offensive could only take place in the late spring at the earliest.[73]

Despite these reservations, the *Denkschrift* went on, as ordered, to outline a plan of attack using the eight divisions from the OHL reserve under the conditions assumed by Falkenhayn. Kuhl proposed a counter-attack at the spot in the front where the enemy attack had come. He felt that this counter-attack should come at either of two moments: immediately after the enemy's attack had collapsed or after the enemy had broken into the first German position. In either case, Kuhl felt the counter-attack must come before the enemy had time to make good his losses and strengthen his position. He believed that the enemy would be weakest at the point where he had launched his own attack. Given the difficulty of timing such a counter-attack properly, he requested the promised forces from the OHL reserve be put under the 6th Army's command and that the 6th Army be given engineering units to construct the necessary artillery and jumping-off positions.

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[70] This offensive proposal shared many similarities with the 11th Army's proposal from March 1915. See Chapter 6.

[71] Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 11 January 1916. See also Kronprinz Rupprecht von Bayern, Mein Kriegstagebuch Bd.1 (ed. Eugen von Frauenholz) (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1929) (diary entry for 10 January 1916) p.412. Before the war, Kuhl had served for a long time in the *Grosser Generalstab*, last serving as an *Oberquartiermeister*. See Hanns Möller-Witten, "General der Infanterie v.Kuhl zum 95.Geburtstag," WWR H.6/7 (1951) pp. 77-78.

[72] Kuhl to Reichsarchiv, 28 October 1932, BA/MA, W10/51318; Der Weltkrieg X, p.30.

[73] At this point in the Denkschrift, Falkenhayn wrote in the margin: "Der Entschluss wird ihnen nicht leicht werden. Sie müssen ihn aber, wie ich glaube, fassen."

Kuhl felt that the limited forces promised by the OHL would allow for only limited goals. The immediate objectives of this counter-attack should be to deal the enemy a "powerful blow," to win key territory which would better the overall German position, and to inflict thereby a heavy blow to the enemy's morale. At the very best, Kuhl hoped the Germans might be able to take complete possession of the Loretto Heights (Vimy Ridge) (to which Falkenhayn noted in the margin: "Fortes Fortuna adjuvat!"). Kuhl would project no goals further than this. Reflecting the overall scepticism of the 6th Army, he refused to be drawn into further speculation as to the objectives of such an operation.[74]

A week later, Falkenhayn responded to the 6th Army's equivocal *Denkschrift*. Despite the opinion of the 6th Army, Falkenhayn stuck by his original assumptions. He wrote:

> Abweichen von dortiger Ansicht halte ich Angriffsversuch des Feindes oder sehr starke Schwächung desselben an der Front nördlich Somme für nahzu sicher, wenn der ... Vorstoss 5.Armee auf Verdun glückt.

He continued to believe that the German attack at Verdun would force the Entente to attack whether they wanted to or not. However, Falkenhayn was not sure where this attack would come. He believed that the attack might occur in the Champagne instead. Accordingly, he refused to release the promised OHL reserves to the 6th Army until the Entente relief offensive actually began. These forces, Falkenhayn promised, could be in the line within 3 or 4 days of the attack.[75]

The 6th Army continued to be unsettled by Falkenhayn's assumptions and plans. On 3 February, Kuhl wrote in his diary:

> Ich glaube nicht an französischen und englischen Angriff. Wir wollen abwarten, wer recht hat .... Ich fürchte, wir kommen mit unserer Armee zu gar nichts. Der Gegenangriff ist eine komplizierte Sache, man ist zunächst vom Feinde abhängig und kann leicht zu spät kommen.[76]

These personal doubts were expressed in a report to the OHL several days later. After analysing the experiences of the demonstrative attack in late January, Kuhl concluded that the Entente forces were certainly not planning a major offensive in the immediate

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[74] AOK 6 to OHL, Ia Nr.267g, 24 January 1916, BA/MA, W10/51520; Weltkrieg X, pp. 30-32. This document is also reprinted in Wendt, op.cit., pp. 230-232.
[75] OHL to AOK 6, Nr.22621 op, 3 February 1916, BA/MA, W10/51520. See also Rupprecht, Kriegstagebuch I, (diary entry for 3 February) p.422f.
[76] Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 3 February 1916.

future and that they were convinced that a German attack would not fall in the area of the 6th Army. In this report, Kuhl again questioned Falkenhayn's belief that a sudden Entente attack must take place after the beginning of the German offensive at Verdun. He felt it was highly unlikely that the Entente would attack the 6th Army if the Verdun attack succeeded. More likely, the British would relieve the French 10th Army, thus freeing more French troops for use at Verdun. However, Kuhl doubted that the British would then attack: "Whether they [the British] will attack, is doubtful, since they are in the process of re-ordering their units (divisions) and at this time apparently not ready..."[77]

Thus, as the first phase of Falkenhayn's strategy for 1916 began in February, the General Staff Chief's assessment of the situation on the Western Front stood in opposition to that of the 6th Army. Despite Falkenhayn's assurances, Kronprinz Rupprecht and Kuhl could not believe that the Entente would attack their army at short notice. Further, they did not believe the eight divisions promised by Falkenhayn would be enough to produce any meaningful results. As with the 5th Army, this difference of opinion with the 6th Army remained unresolved.

* * *

Believing the Champagne to be another likely area for an Entente relief offensive and as an area which offered good prospects for a German counter-attack, Falkenhayn approached the 3rd Army while he was dealing with the 6th. On 1 February, the General Staff Chief telegraphed Vouziers,

> ... würde ich für eine Stellungnahme zu der Frage dankbar sein, ob und wo sowie mit welchen heranzuführenden Kräften aus der dortigen Front heraus ein grösserer Gegenstoss, der mindestens bis in die Gegend Vitry le François[78] führen müsste ...

As with his query to the 6th Army, Falkenhayn asked the 3rd Army to assume that the French forces before them would be considerably weakened.[79]

Several days later, the 3rd Army sent its plan for an offensive to the OHL. The 3rd Army believed that any offensive undertaking must meet two important conditions. First,

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[77] AOK 6 to OHL, Nr.276 g, 7 February 1916, BA/MA, W10/51520. A portion of this document is published in Wendt, op.cit., p.233.
[78] This point lay close to 50 kilometers from the German front lines in January 1916.
[79] Quoted in Solger, "Vorbereitung," p.75. See also Fritz von Loßberg, Meine Tätigkeit im Weltkriege 1914-1918 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1939) pp. 204-205.

the location chosen for the breakthrough must be tactically advantageous to the Germans. Second, the location must allow for an operational exploitation of the tactical breakthrough. After examining their front, the 3rd Army recommended an attack along the Prunay-Vaudesincourt line. This portion of the front offered good rearward communications and the thickly wooded area could hide the concentration of assault troops. Further, the area had good observation points for artillery spotters and had many protected areas from which the artillery could fire. The one drawback was the distance between the German and French lines here – 300 to 1,000 meters. This obstacle would have to be overcome by digging jump-off trenches forward to the French lines and by a gas attack to shield the assaulting infantry from observation.

The 3rd Army projected that the initial tactical breakthrough would require six divisions and considerable heavy artillery, and had as its objective the Vesle. Once this objective had been reached, the 3rd Army planned to exploit the successful tactical breakthrough by two further attacks which would advance southwest and southeast and drive the French back across the Marne and back to Vitry le François. This plan, like the 6th Army's initial plan, called for the use of considerable forces. The 3rd Army asked for 14 divisions from the OHL reserve to add to its 5 divisions. Additionally, the plan called for the use of considerable amounts of heavy artillery – in total, 86 heavy howitzer batteries, 24 mortar batteries, and 19 heavy cannon batteries. Most of these units would have to come from the OHL reserve as well. The 3rd Army believed it would take at least 2 months to make the necessary preparations for the offensive.[80]

Falkenhayn gave his by now normal response to the 3rd Army plan. On 7 February, he wrote the 3rd Army refusing their plan on the grounds that it required strength beyond Germany's means. Once again, Falkenhayn stressed his belief that "mass attacks" like that of the 3rd Army's plan could not succeed under the conditions current in January 1916. Instead, he requested they prepare another plan which would use five or six divisions in the first wave, followed by a second wave of three or two divisions, i.e., the 3rd Army could have the same eight divisions promised to the 6th Army. Falkenhayn

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[80] AOK 3 to OHL, Ia Nr.675 g, 4 February 1916, printed in Wendt, op.cit., pp. 234-236. See also Loßberg, op.cit., pp. 204-205.

further promised enough heavy artillery to have one battery for every 150 meters of front.[81]

Unfortunately, the 3rd Army's second plan seems not to have survived the years since 1916.[82] In his memoirs, Fritz von Loßberg wrote only: "Immediately, the 3rd Army submitted a new plan for an offensive under the conditions assumed by General Falkenhayn. No answer was forthcoming."[83] Einem's *Kriegstagebuch* gives little more detail:

> Mit dem uns zur Verfügung gestellten Kräften können wir weder den östlich vor unserer Front stehenden Feind vertreiben, noch Mourmelon nehmen, sondern wir können höchstens bis zu den Höhen von Baconnes gelangen, diese nehmen und uns dort eingraben. Das ist alles.[84]

The tone of Einem's diary entry suggests that the 3rd Army, like the 6th Army, expected little from a German counter-attack with such limited resources. Again like the 6th Army, the 3rd Army set only limited objectives in its revised plan. The staffs of the two armies clearly felt the war to date had shown the great size of forces and the amount of heavy artillery necessary to carry out a successful breakthrough.

The lack of response from Falkenhayn to the 3rd Army's revised plan is evidence that he increasingly came to view a German counter-attack in the Champagne as not worthwhile. As we will see, as the Verdun battle dragged on, Falkenhayn increasingly came to count on a British relief offensive in the area of the 6th Army, despite the continued scepticism of the 6th Army. Consequently, he let his plans for a German counter-attack in the Champagne fall by the wayside. The surviving documentation, however, shows that Falkenhayn and the 3rd Army had different views of the situation on the Western Front. Falkenhayn expected the French to be severely weakened immediately after the attack on Verdun and thus vulnerable to an attack with limited resources. The 3rd Army, on the other hand, did not believe that significant gains could be achieved with the eight divisions promised by Falkenhayn. Once again, the General Staff Chief's assumptions bore almost no relation to those of his subordinates in the field.

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[81] OHL to AOK 3, No Akten Nr., 7 February 1916, W10/51520. Falkenhayn's response prompted Einem to question why Falkenhayn had not informed the 3rd Army of the force limitations in his initial query. Einem, "Kriegstagebuch," 7 February 1916.

[82] This second plan is not even discussed by the Reichsarchiv in any of the surviving *Forschungsarbeiten* or in Der Weltkrieg X.

[83] Loßberg, op.cit., p.205.

[84] Einem, "Kriegstagebuch," 10 February 1916. From this entry it appears that Loßberg presented the 3rd Army's revised plan to Falkenhayn at the *Chefbesprechung* on 11 February.

Secrecy and Diversionary Attacks

In December 1915, Falkenhayn returned to a strategic idea that had served him well in the campaign in the east in April – strategic surprise. At Gorlice, the German forces had been able to catch the Russians completely unawares and, hence, completely unprepared to meet the German assault. Accordingly, when Knobelsdorf returned to the 5th Army's headquarters on 16 December to prepare the plans for the new offensive, Falkenhayn impressed upon him the importance of secrecy. However, this time Falkenhayn took this idea of secrecy even further than in April.[85] He insisted that access to the planning process for Operation "Gericht" be kept to the absolute minimum and that discussions about the undertaking not be put to paper, but only carried out personally.[86]

Falkenhayn was so carried away with the concept of secrecy that he tried to keep the decision for Verdun secret from Germany's other strategic leaders for as long as possible. He particularly attempted to keep the Chancellor out of the loop. In a meeting shortly after Falkenhayn had approved the 5th Army's *Angriffsentwurf*, he told Bethmann that he remained "undecided" whether or not to undertake a "large-scale offensive" on the Western Front.[87] Falkenhayn's *Geheimhaltung* continued right up to the beginning of the attack. On the eve of the original start date of the offensive, he complained to Admiral Georg von Müller that somehow Bethmann had "got wind of our proposed 'Offensive on the Western Front.'"[88]

Indeed, the General Staff Chief was almost as reticent with his staff at the OHL. Falkenhayn did not inform them of the change from Belfort to Verdun until Christmas Day 1915, leaving them to work on preparations for the Belfort undertaking long after

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[85] Falkenhayn's efforts led Wild to comment, "meitsterhaft ist Falkenhayn im Ersinnen von Täuschungsmassnahmen." Wild, "Kriegstagebuch," 2 February 1916.
[86] Der Weltkrieg X, p.28; Kronprinz Wilhelm, op.cit., p.160.
[87] Bethmann, diary entry for 7 January 1916, printed in Janßen, op.cit., p.288. His Austro-Hungarian allies fared even worse. Falkenhayn deliberately misled the Austrian plenipotentiary at the OHL about German attack plans. Herwig, op.cit., p.186.
[88] Müller, op.cit., (diary entry for 9 February 1916) p.134. In fact, on 2 February, Luckwald had reported to Bethmann: "Von gut informierter Seite...höre ich, dass vorerst nur ein Angriff auf Verdun zu erwarten ist." Luckwald to Bethmann, 2 February 1916, (copied from Reichskanzlei. Weltkrieg 15/1), BA/MA, W10/51543.

the decision had been made to scrap it.[89] This, however, was part of his campaign of strategic deception. The preparations for Operation "Schwarzwald" were continued in an effort to deceive the French as to where the German offensive would come.[90] Barracks were constructed, a 38.5 cm cannon was left in place to shell Belfort occasionally, and Kronprinz Wilhelm paid the area a number of visits prior to the launching of the attack on Verdun.[91] The OHL even went so far as to evacuate portions of the population from Alsace in early December.[92]

To help cover the Verdun preparations further, Falkenhayn ordered the other armies of the *Westheer* to prepare local offensives, a repeat of the *Nebenangriffen* he had used so effectively in the spring to deceive the Entente before the Gorlice undertaking.[93] Accordingly, in the days before the Verdun offensive began, a number of "offensives with limited goals" took place across the Western Front. On 14 February, the 4th Army launched an attack against the "Grosse Bastion" on the Lys Canal southeast of Ypres.[94] The 6th Army renewed its assault on the Giesler Heights east of Souchez.[95] Einem's 3rd Army launched a number of minor attacks on 12 and 13 February to better their field positions, which had taken such a battering in the *Herbstschlacht*.[96]

While the 5th Army did not carry out any diversionary attacks before the offensive, the army carried out its own covering measures, believing firmly that "the prerequisite for success was surprise."[97] First, the 5th Army declared to its troops that a French offensive was expected in February. The preparations they carried out for the Verdun offensive were ostensibly to prepare for this supposed French attack.[98] Further, the 5th Army increased its anti-aircraft defenses with the goal of preventing French

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[89] Geyer to Ernst Kabisch, 8 January 1932, BA/MA, N221/25. Geyer and the rest of the OHL recognized that Falkenhayn did this to maintain the illusion that a German offensive was really going to take place in Upper Alsace.
[90] Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 16 June 1932, BA/MA, N56/5.
[91] Luckwald to Bethmann, 17 February 1916, (copied from Reichskanzlei. Weltkrieg 15/1), BA/MA, W10/51543; "Kriegstagebuch der Adjutantur S.K.H. des Kronprinz," 8 February 1916, BA/MA, W10/51519.
[92] Ministère de la Guerre, Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre Tome IV: Verdun et la Somme Vol.1: Les Projects Offensifs pour 1916 el la Bataille de Verdun (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1926) p.136. (My thanks to James Beach for the use of his translation.)
[93] Falkenhayn, op.cit., p.223; Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 270-276. Indeed, Kronprinz Rupprecht even got the impression that Falkenhayn intended to "exhaust" the enemy with small offensives. Rupprecht, Kriegstagebuch I, (diary entry for 25 December 1915) p.409.
[94] Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 270-271.
[95] Rupprecht, Kriegstagebuch I, pp. 429-432; Kriegstagebuch III, pp. 79-82.
[96] Loßberg, op.cit., pp.207-208.
[97] Kronprinz Wilhelm, op.cit., p.163.
[98] "Angriff auf dem Westufer," p.13.

reconnaissance flights from making it further than the line Montfaucon-Consenvoye-Azanes.[99] In a further effort to hide the attack preparations from the French, most of the building of depots, troop laagers, artillery positions, and jumping-off trenches took place under the cover of night.[100] Last, the attacking corps were only brought into the line just before the assault so that the French would not recognize the German build up.[101]

Conclusion

While Falkenhayn had desired a separate peace with one of Germany's enemies, this goal had eluded him up until 1916. Russia had proved herself unwilling to come to the bargaining table despite the punishment she had suffered during the summer of 1915. The General Staff Chief believed that Germany could find no further successes there, and thus turn his sights back to the Western Front. There, he hoped to be able to split the Western Allies and bring an end to the war. However, the challenge of the tactical situation had first to be overcome before any solution to Germany's strategic problem could be found. To this end, Falkenhayn developed a unique approach that attempted to apply the concept of attrition to the battlefield.

Unable to break through the fortified front lines and unable to deal with the Entente reserves behind those lines, the General Staff Chief proposed instead to force the enemy to attack strong German positions. In order to compel the enemy, in this case the French, to do this, a sensitive point on the front had to be threatened. Falkenhayn intended his attack on Verdun to so endanger the fortress that the French would be forced to launch a counter-offensive, which would be defeated with great loss by the German guns located on the dominating heights over the battlefield. He believed that the French would thereby be placed in a very precarious strategic situation and the British would also be forced to launch a hastily planned relief offensive. This, too, would be repulsed with great losses. If these actions did not compel the French to open peace negotiations, a powerful German counter-offensive could then be launched to break apart the Western Alliance.

Although Falkenhayn certainly came up with a unique approach for winning the war in 1916, in formulating this strategy he drew heavily upon the experiences of 1915.

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[99] AOK 5, Ia Nr.20 geh., 29 December 1915, printed in ibid., p.15.
[100] Kronprinz Wilhelm, op.cit., pp. 164-165.

The war to date in the west had shown the impossibility of achieving a meaningful breakthrough. However, attacks with limited objectives were generally successful in reaching their goals with minimal casualties to the attackers. Further, the war on both fronts had demonstrated the deadly effect of artillery. In the east, Mackensen's offensives used heavy artillery to great effect to inflict large numbers of casualties upon the Russians. In the west, it had proved its worth in defense, again inflicting high losses on the attackers. Moreover, fortresses had proved incapable of withstanding the effect of the heavy artillery employed by the Germans.

Falkenhayn intended to apply the war's operational lessons at Verdun. The 5th Army would make a lunge forward in what amounted to a large-scale attack with limited objectives to seize the heights on the right bank of the Meuse. From this position not only would the Germans threaten the fortress of Verdun, but their artillery would dominate the battlefield. When the French counter-attacked to relieve the pressure on the fortress, they would be attacking into strong German defensive positions. Through these attacks, the French army would "bleed itself white."[102]

This plan clearly depended upon the enemy doing exactly as Falkenhayn desired, something that could not be guaranteed. Additionally, its success rested upon the 5th Army doing as Falkenhayn wanted. As the next chapters shall show, neither of these two requirements were filled completely.

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[101] Ludwig Gold, Die Tragödie von Verdun 1916: Vol.1: Die deutsche Offensivschlacht (Bd.13 Schlachten des Weltkrieges) (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1928) p.23.

[102] Michael Geyer has described the Battle of Verdun as "the complete disjuncture between strategy, battle design and tactics." "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare," in Peter Paret, ed. Makers of Modern Strategy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) p. 536. However, it is clear that Falkenhayn conceived of his plan on all these levels.

Chapter 8:
Verdun: The Execution

For most of the war until February 1916, the Verdun salient had been a quiet sector, with no large-scale actions from either side since Sarrail's defense of the fortress against orders in 1914. In fact, the forts which made up the fortress of Verdun had been stripped of most of their artillery pieces during the second half of 1915 to provide the artillery deficient French army with heavy guns. By 15 October, 43 heavy batteries had been removed from the fortifications.[1] The French High Command (the *Grand Quartier Général*, or GQG) had also begun making plans to abandon the entire right bank of the Meuse and were busy reinforcing the positions on the left bank.[2] The sector's casualty rate was low. On the German side, the XVI Army Corps suffered the highest number of casualties in the 5th Army during January 1916; it reported 153 dead, 488 wounded, and 11 missing.[3]

As 1916 began, Falkenhayn's campaign of strategic deception was working admirably. The Entente powers were unclear where a German offensive might fall. Initially, both British and French intelligence held that the main German offensive effort for 1916 would take place in Russia.[4] Although there was a great deal of intelligence coming in about German attack preparations across the Western Front, this was at first seen merely as a diversionary effort. Only slowly did the Entente awake to the growing German threat in the west. By the end of January, sufficient intelligence had arrived to predict a major German offensive there. Again, however, German counter-measures prevented predicting where this attack would fall. The consensus of opinion in GQG was

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[1] Georges Blond, Verdun (trans. Frances Frenaye) (London: White Lion Publisher, 1976; originally published 1961) p.30.
[2] Ministère de la Guerre, Les Armées Françaises dans la Grand Guerre Tome IV: Verdun et la Somme Vol.1: Les Projects Offensifs pour 1916 et la Bataille de Verdun (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1934) pp.117ff; H.A. DeWeerd, "The Verdun Forts," The Cavalry Journal Vol.XLI Nr.170 (1932) pp.27-28.
[3] Untitled and unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/51526, p.4. (Hereafter, "Angriff auf dem Westufer.")
[4] James Beach, "Haig's Intelligence: GHQ's Perception of the Enemy, 1916-1918: Intelligence in 1916," unpublished manuscript, p.9; Henri Philippe Pétain, Verdun (trans. Margaret MacVeagh) (London: Elkin Mathews & Marrot, 1930) p.38.

that the German main effort would take place in the Champagne, with diversionary attacks falling perhaps in Flanders and at Verdun.[5]

As a consequence, the French made no serious effort to reinforce the *région fortifée de Verdun* before February. On 12 February, the initial start date of the German campaign, the salient was defended by four divisions and two Territorial brigades under the command of General Herr. Additionally, with the heavy artillery removed from Verdun's forts, Herr could only count on a limited amount of field artillery. The 5th Army only identified 65 batteries in the days before the offensive.[6]

The 5th Army's Plans and Preparations

Shortly after Falkenhayn's decision to attack Verdun, the III Army Corps (Lochow), the VII Reserve Corps (Zwehl), the XV Army Corps (Deimling), and the XVII Army Corps (Schenck) were assigned to the 5th Army to form the attack group for the coming offensive. Each of these units had extensive experience on the Western Front. The VII Reserve Corps had captured the French fortress of Maubeuge early in the war and the III Corps had even pioneered the concept of "attacks with limited objectives" at Vailly and Soissons. Each was also well rested, as they had been removed from the front line for rest and extensive training before being sent to the 5th Army.[7] Each corps was also reinforced by a reserve of 2,400 experienced men and 2,000 newly trained recruits. In the interests of secrecy, these units were fed into the Verdun sector slowly. The VII Reserve Corps arrived first in late December and the remainder followed towards the end of January.[8]

The 5th Army staff had begun planning for their undertaking shortly after Knobelsdorf's return from his meeting with Falkenhayn in Berlin on 16 December. The first result of this was the *Angriffsentwurf* delivered to the OHL on 6 January, which outlined the general concepts behind the offensive. After this had been approved by the General Staff Chief, the 5th Army began to work out the details of their attack. On 27 January, this process was completed and orders went out to the assault corps and to the artillery commanders of these corps. Like the orders of the III Corps at its attacks on

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[5] Les Armées Françaises IV/1, pp. 134-143.
[6] Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg Bd.X: Die Operationen des Jahres 1916 bis zum Wechsel in der Obersten Heeresleitung (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1936) p.69.
[7] Ludwig Gold, Die Tragödie von Verdun 1916 Teil 1: Die deutsche Offensivschlacht (Schlachten des Weltkrieges Bd.13) (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1928) pp. 18-22.

Vailly and Soissons in 1914/15 and like the 11th Army's orders for the breakthrough at Gorlice, the 5th Army's attack orders to its subordinates went into considerable detail and marked a continuing trend of higher commands interfering in what, before the war, would have been considered the responsibility of the *kommandiere Generäle*.

The 5th Army divided its zone of attack into four sectors, three of which would make up the main assault. Sector A was assigned to the VII Reserve Corps, sector B to the XVIII Corps, and sector C to the III Corps. Artillery preparation was to begin on the morning of 12 February. At 5:00pm, the infantry of sectors A-C, supported by flame-throwers and grenadiers, would advance in open firing lines [*mit lichten Schützenlinien*] against the French first positions.[9] Where possible, they were to take possession of these positions and then reconnoitre the French second positions for calling in artillery fire to support the next day's assault. The 5th Army emphasized that during the attack, the artillery was to pay special attention to avoid hitting the advancing German infantry.[10]

This portion of the 5th Army's order reads very much like a large-scale "attack with limited objectives." Each army corps was set specific goals. Its attack was to be carefully prepared by artillery fire and its assaulting infantry was to be well supported by fire. Great emphasis was placed on keeping German casualties low. Indeed, this was in keeping with Falkenhayn's general conception for the offensive – the artillery was to bear the burden of the battle, while the role of the infantry was to seize key terrain and to keep the pressure on the French. He later wrote, "our object ... was to inflict upon the enemy the utmost possible injury with the least possible expenditure of lives on our part ..."[11]

The next paragraph of the 5th Army's order, however, proclaimed that an important feature of the assault was its relentless pressure, and seemed to indicate that the offensive's goal was to break through the French positions rather than to seize terrain from which the artillery could dominate the battlefield. The 5th Army wrote:

> Ebenso wie bei dem Artilleriefeuer kommt es bei dem Infanterieangriff für die gesamte Kampfhandlung um die Festung Verdun unbedingt darauf an, *den Angriff niemals in's Stocken kommen lassen*, damit die Franzosen keine

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[8] Der Weltkrieg X, p.61.

[9] The III Corps was further supported by the *Sturmabteilung Rohr*, the fledgling stormtroop formation. See Bruce I. Gudmundsson, Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918 (New York: Praeger, 1989) pp. 55-75; and Hellmuth Gruss, Aufbau und Verwendung der deutschen Sturmbataillone im Weltkrieg (Berlin: Junker und Dünnhaupt Verlag, 1939) pp. 28-31.

[10] AOK 5, Ia Nr. 418g., "Befehl für die Angriffskorps," 27 January 1916, BA/MA, W10/51534; reprinted in Gold, Verdun I, pp. 258-260.

[11] Falkenhayn, op.cit., p.224.

> Gelegenheit finden, sich in rückwärtigen Stellungen erneut zu setzen und den einmal gebrochen Widerstand wieder zu organisieren.[12]

This portion of the order clearly reflected the 5th Army's desire to capture the fortress quickly, as opposed to Falkenhayn's idea of taking dominating terrain, and shows the continuing difference of opinion between the General Staff Chief and the 5th Army over the campaign's goals. Understandably, this dual goal present in the 5th Army's attack order created some confusion with its subordinates. Despite their requests for clarification, however, the 5th Army let its original order stand and each corps was left to itself to determine the meaning.[13] This would lead to difficulties once the attack was launched.

The 5th Army's initial goals – the seizure of Meuse Heights along the line Froide Terre – Fort Souville – Fort Tavannes – was in agreement with Falkenhayn's concept of the offensive. From there, the Germans would be in safe defensive positions and would be able to repel easily any French attempts to retake the lost terrain. However, at the beginning of the campaign the 5th Army's final goals diverged widely from Falkenhayn's. The attack plans of the 27th extended the offensive to the Woevre Plain was well as the Meuse Heights. The XV Army Corps (sector D) was to drive the French from the Plain shortly after the beginning of the main offensive on the Heights.[14] While this was perhaps a logical extension of the attack on the Heights, the 5th Army's order for the VI Reserve Corps to attack the west bank shortly after the start of the offensive went much further.[15] These two orders demonstrate the army's desire to take the fortress quickly and to continue on until the Verdun salient was flattened, rather than fighting a defensive battle designed to "bleed white" the French army.[16]

Falkenhayn and the 5th Army, however, were in agreement about how to employ their artillery. In keeping with Falkenhayn's general conception of the battle, the 5th Army planned for the artillery to bear a heavy burden in the assault on the French positions. Accordingly, the army issued a special "Befehl für die Tätigkeit der Artillerie

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[12] AOK 5, "Befehl für die Angriffskorps," para.3. Emphasis added.
[13] Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 67-68; Hermann Ziese-Beringer, Der einsame Feldherr: Die Wahrheit über Verdun Bd. I (Berlin: Frundsberg-Verlag, 1933) pp. 159-162.
[14] AOK 5, "Befehl für die Angriffskorps," para.3.
[15] AOK 5, "Weitere Mitteilungen" to the "Befehl für die Angriffskorps."
[16] Gerhard von Heymann (Ia of 5th Army) to Reichsarchiv, 28 August 1916, BA/MA, W10/51523. See also Hermann Wendt, Verdun 1916: Die Angriffe Falkenhayns im Maasgebiet mit Richtung auf Verdun als strategisches Problem (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1931) pp. 31ff.

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OHL determined as three days worth of munitions. In total the OHL reckoned on firing 2,000,000 rounds during the first 6 days and an equal number over the next 12 days.[21] To keep the pace of fire steady, 33½ munitions trains would arrive daily.[22] Fire at the pace and for the duration envisioned by Falkenhayn, however, would take its toll upon the German artillery pieces. Therefore, five repair shops were set up close to the front so that minor repairs could be effected in the field. New barrels and other spare parts were stocked at these workshops. As the battle wore on, artillery pieces were shipped back for more comprehensive repairs to factories which were geared to repair and ship them back to the front quickly.[23]

The 5th Army also carefully planned for a redeployment of the artillery once the infantry had reached their goals. The field guns, the mobile heavy howitzers, and the 10 cm cannons were to move forward first under the covering fire of the mortars, the "heaviest" howitzers, and the heavy cannon. Once these batteries were in place and firing, the remaining mobile artillery would move forward. To expedite this process, great attention was to be paid by the advancing troops to finding and preparing possible artillery and observation areas.[24]

Given that the artillery was to bear the main burden of the battle for Verdun, the 5th Army deployed what was for the time a massive array. All told, 1,201 pieces, more than twice the number used at Gorlice, were assembled for the first day of the assault. Although close to a third of this number were "light" field guns (7.7 cm) or "light" field howitzers (10.5 cm) of the *Feldartillerie*, the remainder were the "heavy" and "heaviest" guns and howitzers of the *Fußartillerie*, which ranged in size from 15 cm to 42 cm. Indeed, to assemble this collection, the OHL had been forced to strip the other armies of the *Westheer* of their mobile, modern artillery and replaced them with older models or

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[20] Ibid., para.11. Emphasis in original.
[21] By way of contrast, the British fired 1,768,873 shells during the first 8 days of the Somme. Martin Samuels, Command or Control? (London: Frank Cass, 1995), p.158.
[22] Wilhelm Groener, Lebenserinnerungen (ed. Friedrich Frhr. Hiller von Gaetringen) (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957) p.209 (diary entry for 11 February 1916); Der Weltkrieg X, p.62.
[23] Werner Freiherr von Grünau to Bethmann, 29 March 1916, (copied from Reichskanzlei. Kriegsakten 1, Bd 6), BA/MA, W10/51543.
[24] AOK 5, "Befehl für die Tätigkeit der Artillerie und Minenwerfer," para.12.

with captured Russian guns.[25] The assault was to be further supported by the fire of 202 *Minenwerfer* and 8 flame-thrower companies.[26]

Great hope was placed in this collection of artillery. The gunners of the 5th Army bragged that the effectiveness of their fire would allow the infantry to make a "*Parademarsch nach Verdun.*"[27] The rest of the German leadership set great store in the artillery deployment as well. Adolph Wild von Hohenborn, who as Minister of War was responsible for equipping the army, wrote proudly that the "...artillery deployment at the point of attack is of ... unheard of strength."[28] Hans von Plessen wrote in his diary: "The 'Fat Berthas' (42 cm) will help us to victory here just as they did at Liége, Namur, Maubeuge, Antwerp!"[29] Wilhelm Groener had expressed a similar opinion of the ability of German heavy artillery to destroy modern fortresses, writing that enemy fortresses "cracked like empty nuts" under German fire.[30]

Indeed, the Germans had call to be confident in the effect of their artillery. As Plessen and Groener noted, throughout the war the heavy artillery had proved its worth against fortifications, not only in the west, but also in the east. Indeed, Wild observed that the Verdun salient was one great "fire sack." Placed as it was at the center of a great salient, Verdun could be easily enfiladed by German guns. German batteries could remain dispersed, and hence harder to hit with counter-battery fire, but still concentrate their own fire.[31] As one artillery expert has noted, the Germans enjoyed a number of other advantages over their enemy:

> The terminal effect of the German shells, most of which were larger and fired at higher angles, was superior to that of the French shells. The rate of fire of German pieces, most of which had been built in the decade prior to the battle, was greater than that of the generally older French pieces. And, most significantly, the German artillery greatly outnumbered the French artillery in the sector. This overwhelming superiority in artillery gave Falkenhayn every reason to assume that the 5th Army would be able to gain permanent fire superiority over the French

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[25] Gerhard Tappen, Meine Kriegserinnerungen, unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/50661, p.172; Ernst von Wrisberg, Heer und Heimat 1914-1918 (Leipzig: KF Koehler, 1921) pp. 59-60.
[26] Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 61-63. Wendt, op.cit., p.46f gives slightly different numbers, as does Gold, Verdun I, pp. 35-36.
[27] Cordt von Brandis, Der Sturmangriff: Kriegserfahrungen eines Frontoffiziers (No Publisher, 1917) p.5. My thanks to Bruce Gudmundsson for a copy of this document.
[28] Adolph Wild von Hohenborn, "Kriegstagebuch," 1 February 1916, BA/MA, Wild Nachlass, N44/2.
[29] Hans von Plessen, "Tagebuch," 7 January 1916, BA/MA, W10/50656.
[30] Groener, diary entry for 20 August 1915 in Lebenserinnerungen, p.247; See also, Erich von Luckwald to Bethmann, 17 February 1916, (copied from Reichskanzlei. Weltkrieg 1914/18. 15.Allg. Milit- und Marine-Berichte aus dem Gr.H.Qu Bd 1) BA/MA, W10/51543; Holger Afflerbach, Falkenhayn: Poltisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1994) p.363f.
[31] Wild, "Kriegstagebuch," 11 December 1915.

artillery while having enough firepower left over to repel French counterattacks and repeatedly bombard French infantry positions.[32]

Falkenhayn's First Phase

By 12 February, the 5th Army stood ready to launch its offensive. The attacking corps had taken up position in the front line and the artillery batteries were in place and provisioned. The weather, unfortunately, intervened to postpone their assault. The attack's reliance upon artillery meant that good weather was essential for observation, and when morning broke on the 12th, the 5th Army's observers were blinded by rain and snow. For the next 10 days, they waited for the weather to break. The assault troops froze in their jumping-off positions or marched back and forth between the front lines and their billets, while the staffs waited impatiently in the rear.[33]

The delay was not merely frustrating, however. It had serious consequences for the outcome of the offensive. The massing of so many troops and artillery batteries at Verdun could not be kept secret for long. In the days between the initial start date and 21 February, the French had received more detailed intelligence concerning the German attack, which caused them to reassess their earlier assumptions. By 21 February, the French were well informed about the strength of the German deployment at Verdun. Although the German deception measures were generally successful in keeping the Entente guessing as to where *the* major German offensive might fall, they realized a large attack was coming at Verdun.[34] While the GQG's request on 18 February that the British relieve the French 10th Army was rejected, reinforcements were nonetheless sent to Verdun to meet the impending German attack.[35]

On 12 February, the French force in the Verdun salient had consisted of five divisions. By 21 February, the defensive force had been considerably strengthened. Three French corps were now crowded into the salient – one corps of two divisions on the west bank and two corps, each of three divisions, on the east bank. A further three divisions were held in reserve. The French artillery strength had also grown. By the start of the 5th Army's offensive, the French had 388 field guns and 244 heavy artillery pieces in the

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[32] Bruce I. Gudmundsson, On Artillery (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1993) pp. 58-59.
[33] Gold, Verdun I, pp. 48-50. Some assault units had to remain in dugouts which had filled with freezing water by 21 February.
[34] Joffre feared a German offensive in the Champagne, especially after the 3rd Army's diversionary attack there in early February. Les Armées Françaises IV/1, Annexe 171.
[35] Beach, op.cit., pp. 12ff.

salient.[36] Thus, rather than meeting a weak, surprised enemy on 21 February, the three German attack corps met an opponent reinforced and forewarned.[37]

However, the knowledge of the coming attack did not spare the defenders the intensity and accuracy of the 5th Army's opening bombardment. From 8:00am until 5:00pm, the 1400 German artillery pieces and mortars pounded the French positions. Shells from the heavy artillery rained down on the city of Verdun, destroying bridges and setting fire to the train station. Long-range artillery cut the rail line. By 9:00am, all communication with the French front line had been cut, and reinforcements could not penetrate the thick German bombardment.[38] French defensive fire was "generally weak" and was "scattered about without a set plan."[39]

In late afternoon, patrols from the attacking German units began probing the French first line. In general, they were met by little or no French fire. By 5:00pm, the infantry of all three attack corps was engaged with the enemy. In sector A, the VII Reserve Corps met little resistance and was able to clear most of the Bois d'Haumont, capturing the French first and second trench lines. Its infantry reported that the artillery had completely destroyed the enemy positions and had stunned or killed the French defenders. In sectors B and C, however, the XVIII Corps and the III Corps met with stiffer resistance. The XVIII Corps found that the French positions in Bois des Caures had not been fully destroyed. Consequently, they were able only to take a small portion of the first French trench. The III Corps faced a similar situation in Herbebois. Only after taking heavy casualties had they been able to wrestle most of the forward trench from French hands. Wherever the French had placed their defenses in wooded areas, the German artillery had been unable to prepare the battlefield properly, and the attacking infantry encountered shaken but reasonably unharmed French defenders in undamaged positions.[40] Additionally, on many areas of the front, the French second trench had not been under German observation and had, therefore, been largely spared German preparatory fire.[41]

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[36] Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 104-106; Wendt, op.cit., pp. 60-65.
[37] See Helmuth Otto, "Die Schlacht um Verdun (Februar-Dezember 1916)," Militärgeschichte 5/1986, p.410f. German Werth, Verdun Die Schlacht und der Mythos (Augsburg: Weltbild Verlag, 1989), pp. 62ff.
[38] Les Armées Françaises IV/1, pp. 216-221; Alistair Horne, The Price of Glory: Verdun 1916 (London: Penguin Books, 1993; originally published 1962) pp. 70-76.
[39] AOK 5, "Gefechtsberichte I," 21 February 1916.
[40] Kronprinz Wilhelm, op.cit., p.174.
[41] AOK 5, "Gefechtsberichte I," 21 February 1916; Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 72-74.

For the next day's assault, German observers moved forward to direct the artillery fire, and after several hours of bombardment, the infantry of the attack corps advanced again. The VII Reserve Corps once more had great success, seizing the village of Haumont and outflanking the French position in Bois des Caures. This enabled the XVIII Corps finally to take the French first and second positions there. The III Corps was able to advance through the French second position in the Bois de Ville. For the first time during the offensive, French artillery fire from behind the Côte de Marre on the west bank of the Meuse hindered the German advance. German counter-battery fire, including a gas attack, was unsuccessful in silencing these batteries.[42]

The offensive's third day, 23 February, proceeded similarly to the first two days. The corps attacked after several hours of artillery preparation and after hard fighting seized the next French defensive position. By the end of the day, the attack's right flank had reached the Meuse at Brabant. On the left flank, the III Corps cleared the remainder of the French from Herbebois and in the center, the XVIII Corps captured the remaining trenches of the French second line. Once again, fire from the French batteries on the river's west bank caused considerable casualties amongst the attacking troops.[43] By the day's end, however, the entire French first defensive position was in German hands. By nightfall, the 5th Army ordered the first artillery displacement to take place.[44]

For the next several days, the Germans repeated their performance, with a few notable successes, particularly the capture of Fort Douaumont on 25 February. By 27 February, the attack corps had generally reached their initial objectives. However, progress was now much slower and was costing many more casualties. At this point, it was clear that the French had decided to hold the heights and the right bank of the Meuse. Increasingly, the 5th Army was met by powerful French counter-attacks, supported by heavy artillery fire from the west bank.[45] The progress of the offensive was further hampered by the difficulty of moving the artillery forward through the crater-pitted no man's land.[46] The 5th Army also maintained that the offensive strength of its attack corps was temporarily spent.[47] On the 27th, the OHL was forced to admit that "the

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[42] AOK 5, "Gefechtsberichte I," 22 February 1916; Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 74-78; Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, p.178.
[43] Kronprinz Wilhelm, op.cit., p.175.
[44] AOK 5, "Gefechtsberichte I," 23 February 1916; Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 76-78.
[45] AOK 5, "Gefechtsberichte I," 27 February 1916.
[46] Kronprinz Wilhelm, op.cit., p.179.
[47] Ibid., p.177; Der Weltkrieg X, p.84.

enemy has brought the offensive on the [Meuse] Heights temporarily to a halt," and the first phase of the operation at Verdun came to a close.[48]

The measures taken by the OHL and the tactics employed by the 5th Army allowed the offensive to produce significant results in its first phase. Although by 21 February the French had come to expect a German offensive at Verdun, they did not believe this would be the main German undertaking. The reinforcement that had arrived by the start of the offensive was by no means sufficient to halt the initial German advance. Further, the 5th Army's use of heavy artillery had allowed them to blast their way through the French defensive positions with little difficulty. As a consequence, by 27 February, the 5th Army had captured 216 officers, 14,534 men, 45 artillery pieces, including 17 heavy pieces, and 54 machineguns.[49] All told, the French had lost 24,000 by 26 February.[50] Additionally, they had advanced 3 kilometers forward over a 10-km front. The cost to the 5th Army, though, was not inconsiderable – around 25,000.[51]

However, despite these notable successes, the 5th Army had been unable to reach their goal of capturing the Meuse heights. The capture of these dominating hills was essential to the objective of "bleeding white" the French army while minimizing German casualties. So long as the French held these positions, they would be able to direct accurate artillery fire down upon the German troops and inflict high casualties upon the attackers.

The French Response

The German assault had severely shaken the French defenders. The 72nd and 51st Reserve Divisions of the XXX Corps were all but destroyed,[52] and on 24 February, the commander of the *région fortifée de Verdun*, General Herr, issued orders to begin the evacuation of the right bank. His decision was initially supported by Marshal Joseph Joffre who believed that Verdun was not essential for the defense of France and, therefore, not worth holding. However, his deputy, General Noël de Castelnau, arrived at Verdun on 25 February and made the decision that, with reinforcement, the right bank

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[48] OHL, "Kriegstagebuch," 27 February 1916, quoted in Der Weltkrieg X, p.100; Falkenhayn, op.cit., pp. 233-234. Cf. Wendt, op.cit., pp. 93ff.
[49] AOK 5, "Gefechtsberichte I," 27 February 1916.
[50] Wendt, op.cit., p.243.
[51] Ernst Kabisch, Verdun: Wende des Weltkrieges (Berlin: Vorhut-Verlag Otto Schlegel, 1935) p.108.
[52] The 51st Reserve Division had lost 62% of its officers and 61% of its men in only 4 days of fighting. Wendt, op.cit., p.74.

could indeed be held and countermanded Herr's evacuation orders. His order read: "The Meuse must be held on the right bank. There can be no question of any other course than that of checking the enemy, cost what it may, on that bank."[53] General Pétain's 2nd Army, the immediate French reserve, was despatched to the fortress with the orders to hold at all costs.[54] Going further than Castelnau, Pétain's first order after taking command at Verdun had an offensive component. He ordered: "Beat off at all costs the attacks of the enemy, and *retake immediately any piece of land taken by him.*"[55]

Upon arriving in Verdun, Pétain began bringing in reserves and reorganizing the sector for defense. The first reinforcements, units of the XX Army Corps, began arriving in Verdun during the night of 24/25 February and were immediately deployed. The units of the 2nd Army began arriving on shortly thereafter. By the 26th, there were nine French corps either deployed in the Verdun sector or on their way there.[56] Pétain ordered new positions to be constructed behind the front lines and the forts to be rearmed. Crucially, the ability of the defenders to continue to resist was ensured by the creation of a supply line which ran along a secondary road from Bar-le-Duc, what would become known as the "Sacred Way." From 27 February to 6 March, over 190,000 troops and 23,000 tons of munitions were brought along this route in to Verdun.[57]

Most importantly, however, Pétain took special interest in reorganizing the French artillery. First, he ordered that the artillery be used aggressively and offensively to give the French infantry the impression the Germans did not dominate the battlefield.[58] This order had another, perhaps more significant, effect. It hit the Germans when they were at their most vulnerable – during the attack. Crossing no man's land to assault the French positions, the German troops were highly vulnerable to the fire of the French 75s, the French army's most effective and numerous artillery piece, and Pétain's order ensured they were used to the utmost effect. Moreover, Pétain centralized the command over the French batteries, and the heavy artillery was deployed behind the hills of the west bank to enfilade the Germans on the right.[59] With their good observation positions

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[53] Quoted in Pétain, op.cit., p.76; see also, Horne, op.cit., pp. 126-131.
[54] Les Armées Françaises IV/1, pp. 295-296; F.W. Prüter, "Der 24. Februar 1916 von Verdun von französischer Seite gesehen," WuW Jg.1933 pp. 1-17.
[55] Quoted in Richard Griffiths, Marshal Pétain (London: Constable, 1970) p.23. Emphasis added.
[56] Wendt, op.cit., p.87.
[57] Pétain, op.cit., p.111.
[58] Les Armées Françaises IV/1, p.322.
[59] Ibid., pp. 320-321.

on the heights of both banks, the French artillery was now able to do great damage to the German assault troops.

By resolving to hold the right bank of the Meuse regardless of casualties, the French had taken a decisive step. They created a symbol that could not be voluntarily surrendered without doing great damage to French morale. Across the board, French soldiers and politicians now stressed the importance of holding Verdun. The Minister of War, General Galliéni, announced on 2 March: "The enemy may go on with his efforts. But the French nation, serene and confident, feels sure that our army is confronting him with a barrier that cannot be overthrown."[60] The theme was picked up by others in the GQG and by the government. A steady stream of visitors called upon Pétain's headquarters, including President Raymond Poincaré.[61] Falkenhayn had indeed found an object for which the GQG was "...compelled to throw in every man they have." However, not only was Verdun, the "moral bulwark of France,"[62] to be held at any price, but any lost terrain was to be retaken by counter-attack. The French had fallen headlong into Falkenhayn's trap.

Attack on the West Bank

The slowdown of the offensive brought renewed calls from the 5th Army for further troops and artillery. Prior to the offensive, Falkenhayn had believed that the French artillery on the west bank could be suppressed by German counter-battery fire. However, this failed to be the case, even after the 5th Army created a special artillery task force to accomplish this mission.[63] Fire coming from the French batteries on the west bank continued to cause severe casualties and hamper the progress of the offensive. On 24 and 26 February, the 5th Army requested additional forces to expand the assault to the west bank. The General Staff Chief refused, remarking to Tappen that "due to the rapid advance on the east bank, we do not need to give [the 5th Army] additional forces."[64] He believed that the east bank would be captured soon and that the 5th Army would then be able to take the west bank with the forces at its disposal. Further, expanding the attack at Verdun did not fit into Falkenhayn's overall strategy for 1916. He reported to the 5th

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[60] Quoted in Pétain, op.cit., p.112.
[61] Blond, op.cit., pp. 131-132.
[62] Pétain, op.cit., p.15.
[63] Der Weltkrieg X, p.93.
[64] Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 26 February.

Army: "The point is not only to strike the French army but to destroy it. That will certainly occur when the Germans attack at another point after the French have brought together powerful forces at Verdun."[65] Sufficient reserves needed to be maintained to carry out this second phase. The 5th Army was so concerned about the flanking fire from the west, however, that an abortive attack was made by the VI Reserve Corps to take the French positions by a *coup de main*.[66]

Clearly, until 27 February when the first standstill in the offensive took place, Falkenhayn was satisfied with its results. To this date, the 5th Army had achieved its initial goals and looked likely to be able to take the Meuse Heights without reinforcement. However, once it became clear that the French had determined to hold the right bank at all costs and that the 5th Army could not seize rapidly the crucial heights, the General Staff Chief began to have doubts about the attack. He later wrote of this time: "...the question that had to be considered by the GHQ was whether to intimate that the continuance of the operation on the Meuse would be abandoned, and a new enterprise started on another front."[67] The 6th Army had already sent the OHL a *Denkschrift* on a breakthrough operation in its sector,[68] and in early March, Falkenhayn began to receive plans for an offensive from the other armies of the *Westheer*.[69]

Despite his doubts, Falkenhayn was convinced by Knobelsdorf on 29 February to release two additional divisions to expand the offensive to the west bank. Knobelsdorf assured the General Staff Chief that when the western Meuse Heights were taken, the offensive on the east bank could be resumed and the ultimate goal, the heights on the east bank, reached.[70] Additionally, Falkenhayn's goal of destroying the French reserves had not yet been reached by the end of February. Although the French had sent substantial reinforcement to Verdun, they still maintained a considerable reserve. The *Nachrichtenabteilung* reported that the French had deployed 15 to 18 divisions to the Verdun sector by the end of February. This, however, still left them with 6 or 9 divisions in immediate reserve plus the 15 divisions which would be freed by the British relief of

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[65] Heymann to Reichsarchiv, quoted in Der Weltkrieg X, p.277.
[66] AOK 5, "Gefechtsberichte I," 27 February 1916; "Angriff auf dem Westufer," pp. 36-39; Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 206-207.
[67] Falkenhayn, op.cit., p.235; Tappen, Kriegerinnerungen, p.178.
[68] AOK 6, "Der Durchbruch," Nr. 41494, 26 February, BA/MA, W10/51520.
[69] Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 279-283. See Chapter 9 below.
[70] The 11th Bavarian Division and the 22nd Reserve Division under the X Reserve Corps and 21 heavy batteries were transferred from the OHL reserve to the 5th Army. "Angriff auf dem Westufer," p.46; AOK 5, "Gefechtsberechte I," 29 February 1916.

the 10th Army.[71] A resumption of the offensive would cause the French to send in additional reinforcement and to launch further counter-attacks.[72] Falkenhayn and Knobelsdorf agreed that the VI Reserve Corps, strengthened by the X Reserve Corps, should seize the line south of Avocourt - Côte 304 (north of Esnes) -"Mort Homme"- Bois de Cumières - Côte 265,[73] from which they believed it would be possible to destroy the French artillery on the west bank and allow the attack on the east to proceed.[74]

The assault on the west bank was meant to progress much like the previous attacks on the east bank. The infantry assault would follow a powerful artillery bombardment designed to destroy the first French defensive positions and to neutralize the French artillery. To accomplish this, the organic artillery of *General der Infanterie* von Gossler's two-corps strong assault group was reinforced by 25 heavy artillery batteries. As during the attack on the east bank, the group's artillery was centralized under the command of one officer. The group was to be further supported by fire from the German heavy batteries on the east bank and by a crossing of the Meuse by a brigade of the VII Reserve Corps.[75] Given the limited artillery, Gossler determined to split his attack into two separate phases. The first, scheduled to begin on 6 March, would take the eastern portion of the attack's goals ("Mort Homme" and Côte 265), while the second would follow on 9 March and take Avocourt and Côte 304.[76]

At 8:00am on 6 March, the artillery of Gossler's attack group began its preparatory fire, and at 11:50am, the infantry began their assault. Once again the heavy artillery bombardment had done its task. Communications between the French front line and the rear were cut and the defenders were severely shaken.[77] Quickly the German assault troops overran the first French positions. However, the attack soon began to falter under heavy French fire and determined French resistance. The VII Reserve Corps' brigade became bogged down in fighting in Regnéville and was unable to support the

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[71] "Die Beurteilung der Kampfkraft der französischen Armee durch die deutsche OHL zwischen 1.1 und 29.8.16," BA/MA, W10/51521, pp. 26-30; Der Weltkrieg X, p.286.
[72] Falkenhayn, op.cit., p.237.
[73] Two hills close together, Côte 285 and Côte 285.9, together made up the "Mort Homme." See Horne, op.cit., p. 156.
[74] Luckwald to Bethmann, 15 March 1916, (copied from Reichskanzlei. Weltkrieg 15/1) BA/MA, W10/51543.
[75] Gossler, Ia Nr.380, 3 March 1916, BA/MA, W10/51526.
[76] Ibid., paragraphs 6-8; "Angriff auf dem Westufer," pp. 49-50.
[77] Horne, op.cit., p.157.

assault on Côte 265.[78] Consequently, this attack also became stuck, and only after repeated, costly assaults was the hill taken at 6:00pm.[79] Despite some successes, the right wing of the attack also failed to take its objective for the day, "Mort Homme."

Over the next week, Gossler's attack group tried to take "Mort Homme," but met with only slow progress. Despite powerful artillery preparation and good artillery support during the battle, the infantry was able to take its objectives only with great casualties and after repeated assaults. In several places German advances were thrown back by French counter-attacks, and as the battle went on, Gossler was forced to keep two-thirds of his force in reserve to meet these counter-attacks.[80] The advance of the German infantry was further hampered by French artillery fire, which tore into their ranks while they formed for an assault as well as during the attack itself. Finally on 14 March, the group was able to take the northern-most hilltop of "Mort Homme" and hold it against violent French counter-attacks.[81] The summit, however, remained in French hands, and would do so until late May.

After more than a week of hard fighting, Gossler's group had finally reached the objectives of the first phase of his attack.[82] However, even this did not bring relief for the German troops on the east bank. French artillery fire from behind the Côte de Marre and Bois Bourrus still ranged over the German positions, causing severe casualties. The artillery brought up to Côte 265 by the Germans to combat the French artillery was itself taken under heavy, systematic fire.[83] It was clear to the German leadership that Côte 304, the objective of Gossler's second phase, would now have to be taken to ensure the safety of the German gains so far and to combat effectively the French artillery on the west bank.[84]

Gossler's attack group began the second phase of its offensive on 20 March. After another heavy barrage, which included a special bombardment of over 13,000 trench mortar rounds, the 11th Bavarian Division and the 11th Reserve Division attacked the

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[78] Despite Horne's assertion that the German attack went as planned on this day, the Reichsarchiv wrote that the "unity of the attack collapsed" when the brigade of the VII RK became bogged down in Regnéville. Horne, op.cit., p.157; "Angriff auf dem Westufer," p.58.
[79] "Gefechtsberichte I," 6 March 1916.
[80] "Gefechtsberichte I," 8 March and 10 March 1916.
[81] Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 212-213.
[82] The three divisions of Gossler's attack group lost nearly 10,000 men between 6 and 20 March. Der Weltkrieg X, p.213.
[83] Der Weltkrieg X, p.213.
[84] AOK 5, "Gefechtsberichte für die Zeit vom 15.3.16—3.4.16," 18 March 1916, BA/MA, W10/51583 (Hereafter, "Gefechtsberichte II").

French positions south of Malancourt and in the Bois d'Avocourt.[85] Once again, the German troops reached their initial goals with little difficulty. Rather than continue the attack immediately, Gossler's group paused to consolidate their new positions and to prepare another heavy barrage for the next day's assault. On 22 March, the two divisions advanced against the French positions on "Termite Hill," a key position on the way to the summit of Côte 304. They were met with a hail of artillery and machinegun fire. The French also took the German assembly points and lines of communication under heavy artillery fire. The combination brought the German advance to an immediate halt.[86] Although some small gains were made during the day, the cost to the Germans was high, and the positions they reached remained under such heavy French fire that they were able to dig in only with great difficulty.[87]

By 30 March, Gossler's attack group had still not taken Côte 304, despite losing around 20,000 men.[88] On this day, the XXII Reserve Corps was brought in as reinforcement and *General der Artillerie* Max von Gallwitz was given command over the newly created *Angriffsgruppe West*. This reorganization and reinforcement, however, did little to improve the situation and Côte 304 was not to fall until May.

The attacks on the west bank in March show clearly how the conditions on the battlefield had changed since the offensive's beginning on 21 February. The Germans had lost the advantage of surprise and were now attacking a determined, well-supplied enemy in strong defensive positions. Although the German artillery was still superior to the French and could annihilate the French forward positions when need be, the attacking German infantry suffered severe casualties from French counter-fire aimed at both the assaulting infantry and at their rearward communications. Forward progress could only be achieved after intense preparation and was often repulsed by French counter-attacks. When the Germans could hold the positions they had seized, the French artillery caused continued losses.

The attack on the west bank showed another important characteristic of the offensive. When a "key" position, such as "Mort Homme" or Fort Douaumont, was captured, often another terrain feature had to be taken to ensure its retention. Even if the

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[85] Der Weltkrieg X, p.215.
[86] Ludwig Gold, Die Tragödie von Verdun 1916 Teil III: Toter Mann – Höhe 304 (Schlachten des Weltkrieges Bd 15) (Oldenburg: Gerhard Stalling, 1935) pp. 28-36.
[87] "Gefechtsberichte II," 22 March 1916.
[88] Der Weltkrieg X, p.221.

attrition of the French army had not been the goal of the German leadership, this characteristic ensured that the battle would be almost continuous until a safe defensive position could be reached.[89]

Standstill and Doubts

The attacks on the west bank had not achieved their goal of allowing the advance on the east bank to proceed, and by the end of March progress at Verdun had once more come to a standstill. Additionally, the offensive had cost the Germans dearly. From the offensive's start until the end of March, the Germans had suffered 81,607 casualties.[90] Falkenhayn again questioned how the campaign should be continued, fearing that the offensive might come to be another Ypres.[91] On 27 March, Wild recorded in his diary: "At Verdun it goes slowly – unfortunately! To Falkenhayn's earnest question whether the operation should be stopped, I answered no.... *France* must be tapped of much more blood..."[92] The General Staff Chief's unease with the course of operation caused another sharp exchange with the 5th Army, who wanted additional forces to continue the offensive.

On 31 March, the 5th Army answered Falkenhayn's request for justification for further reinforcement.[93] The 5th Army clearly had a much more positive view of the situation at this stage than did the General Staff Chief. Their letter indicated that they believed the offensive had brought the French army to the brink of exhaustion, and that the French were no longer capable of large-scale offensives. This made them conclude that "...the fate of the French army will be decided *at Verdun*," and that the "annihilation of the trained French reserve as well as the reserve of material and munitions should be completed with all possible speed." The 5th Army wanted to continue the attack on the east bank until it had reached at least the line Ouvrage de Thiaumont - Fleury - Fort Souville - Fort de Tavannes. On the west bank, they wanted to allow the "... enemy reserves to destroy themselves over the course of time through violent counter-attacks."[94]

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[89] Afflerbach, op.cit., p.370.
[90] Wendt, op.cit., p. 243. Wendt used the OHL files to calculate German casualties through the battle.
[91] Afflerbach, op.cit., p.371.
[92] Wild, "Kriegstagebuch," 27 March 1916. Emphasis in original. See also Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, p.179.
[93] Falkenhayn to AOK 5, Nr.5937 op., 30 March 1916, BA/MA, W10/51553.
[94] AOK 5 to OHL, Nr.848g., 31 March 1916, BA/MA, W10/51584.

Clearly, the initially reluctant command of the 5th Army had accepted Falkenhayn's goal of "bleeding the French army white" completely.[95]

Despite the 5th Army's conversion to Falkenhayn's idea of attrition, the General Staff Chief did not agree with much of their letter. On 4 April, he wrote back to correct some of the 5th Army's misconceptions, advising them that they both underestimated French strength and overestimated German resources. He reckoned that the French still possessed considerable reserves.[96] As for German strength, he wrote: "The assumption that we are in the position to relieve the worn-out units with fresh, high-quality units at any time and that we are able to provide a continuous replacement of material and munitions is false." The resumption of the offensive on the east bank was impending. If this assault were unsuccessful, Falkenhayn requested that the 5th Army confer with the commanders of its units and advise the OHL whether a continuation of the offensive was worthwhile and, if so, to recommend how it should proceed. The General Staff Chief recognized clearly that if the offensive were broken off without taking the Meuse Heights, it would be considered a failure, but was willing to accept this price if the 5th Army believed the offensive had reached the end of its progress.[97]

The offensive of early April was not a success, and in the middle of the month, Knobelsdorf collected reports from the attack corps over the prospects of the offensive. The commanders of the 5th Army's corps all spoke for a continuation of the offensive. They were unanimous that they could not remain in their current locations for several reasons. First, and most importantly, the infantry in the front line were exposed to a withering fire in their current positions. *General der Infanterie* Bruno von Mudra, who had commanded the *Angriffsgruppe Ost*, spoke for all the units when he wrote:

> Die Angriffs-Infanterie ist hiernach in ihren Stellungen dauernd schwerem und Feldartilleriefeuer ausgesetzt, vielfach flankierend, teilweise Rückenfeuer. Die rückwärtigen Verbindungen, die Lager der Bereitschaften und selbst die Reserven sind in gleicher Weise dem gegnerischen Feuer aller Kaliber preisgegeben.
>
> Die Infanterie erleidet also in den vorderen Stellungen täglich schwere Verluste; nicht weniger auf ihren Verbindungen und in ihren Lagern. Das

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[95] In his memoirs, Kronprinz Wilhelm distanced himself from this position, writing that it was only Knobelsdorf who was now an adherent to the idea of the "Maasmühle." Kronprinz Wilhelm op.cit. pp. 186-189. See also Wendt, op.cit., pp.119-20.

[96] The General Staff Chief believed the French to possess up to 13 divisions in reserve, in addition to 14 British divisions. See his comments to AOK 5 Nr.858.

[97] Falkenhayn to AOK 5, Nr.26159, 4 April 1916, BA/MA, W10/51584.

> Vorbringen der Verpflegung und sonstigen Nachschubes verbraucht unverhältnismässig viel Zeit und Kräfte.[98]

The construction of suitable defensive positions was difficult, as the infantry of the German attack corps stood exposed in land which had been swept clean by the German artillery fire and was now exposed to continuous French fire. Further advance was imperative to push the French from the high ground above the German positions and ensure the retention of the offensive's gains so far.[99]

A second reason given for the continuation of the offensive was psychological. *General der Infanterie* Berthold von Deimling, commander of the XV Army Corps, wrote: "Enduring passively the fire of the French heavy artillery and gas rounds, without being able to move forward themselves, places great demands on the moral strength of the infantry."[100] The commanders and staffs of the units involved in the offensive clearly felt that progress was needed to sustain the morale of their troops.

Knobelsdorf presented Falkenhayn with the reports of the attack corps on 20 April. As a further inducement, he told the General Staff Chief that, if the offensive did not go forward, it would have to go back. He did not believe they could stay in their current position, so a withdrawal to the offensive's start line would be necessary if they did not make further progress. Rejecting Mudra's approach of advances by individual divisions in "attacks with limited objectives," Knobelsdorf pressed for a resumption of the offensive on a large-scale, i.e., a simultaneous attack by all the units in a given sector. In this way, he still hoped to make considerable progress and reach the line Ouvrage de Thiaumont - Fleury - Fort Souville - Fort de Tavannes rapidly.[101] In the end, Falkenhayn was swayed by the opinions of the 5th Army's staff and its corps commanders and decided to continue the offensive along the lines proposed by the 5th Army's chief.

From this decision on, there was no turning back on the offensive. By the end of April, 21 German divisions, most of the OHL reserve, were engaged in the Verdun

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[98] Mudra to AOK 5, Nr.480 pers., 21 April 1916, BA/MA, W10/51583. Mudra commanded the *Angriffsgruppe Ost* from 19 March to 15 April, when he was replaced by Lochow. Der Weltkrieg X, p.146.
[99] VII RK to AOK 5, "Absichten des VII.RK," Ia 29/IV g., 18 April 1916; Angriffsgruppe Ost to AOK 5, Ia Nr.350 geh., 18 April 1916, BA/MA, W10/51583.
[100] Deimling to Falkenhayn, Ia.Nr.285 geh., 19 April 1916, BA/MA, W10/51583. See also, Berthold von Deimling, Aus der alten in die neue Zeit (Berlin: Im Verlag Ullstein, 1930) pp. 208-211.
[101] AOK 5 to OHL, Ia Nr.995 geh., 20 April 1916, BA/MA, W10/51583.

sector, and additional units had been brought in from the Eastern Front.[102] At the offensive's beginning, the capture of Verdun had not been Falkenhayn's goal. From May, however, the expenditure of blood and the value placed on the fortress by the French nation meant that anything less then its capture would be considered a failure by Germans and enemies alike. Indeed, the Kaiser had announced on 1 April: "The decision of the War of 1870 took place in Paris. This war will end at Verdun."[103] What had been only the first phase of Falkenhayn's strategy in 1916, now came to be the decisive element. German prestige, as well as Falkenhayn's personal reputation, was now closely bound to the success or failure of the offensive.[104]

From the end of April, the offensive would suck in more and more German units and result in severe German casualties. Knobelsdorf's approach of large-scale, all-out assaults replaced Mudra's approach of attacks with limited objectives. Moreover, by April the nature of the battle had changed. German troops now attacked a strong enemy in solid defensive positions. Progress could only be made slowly and at great cost. This brought about a shift in where the attrition of the French army was to occur. While the original idea had been for the "*Verblutung*" of the French to come from their attacks against secure German defensive positions, after the initial successes in February the attrition was carried out instead by German attacks and French local counter-thrusts. Despite this shift in approach, Falkenhayn, who believed that German troops attacked more effectively than French, still felt the gruesome task could be accomplished. Even though the German units were suffering horribly, the General Staff Chief maintained that the French were suffering more; "for two Germans put out of action five Frenchmen had to shed their blood."[105] This shift in the method of attrition focused attention to tactics.

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[102] Der Weltkrieg X, p.298. Eight divisions were left in the OHL reserve, but all of the OHL's artillery reserve was engaged at Verdun.

[103] Horne, op.cit., p.165.

[104] Already by the end of March, the army's leaders had begun questioning the wisdom of the offensive, and Kuhl had made the observation: "Nun ist die ganze sache zu einer Machtprobe bei Verdun geworden, zu einer Prestigefrage." Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 27 March 1916. See also, Rupprecht, Kriegstagebuch I, p.439 (diary entry for 20 March 1916); Einem to his wife, 25 March 1916, BA/MA, N324/52; Wallach, op.cit., p.173; Otto, op.cit, p.412.

[105] Falkenhayn, op.cit., p.237; General Schjerning made a similar observation to Grünau, saying that the French suffered 2 ½ to 3 casualties for every German. Grünau to Bethmann, 29 March 1916, (copied from Reichskanzlei. Kriegsakten 1/6) BA/MA, W10/51543.

Tactics

As we have seen, before the offensive had begun Falkenhayn had rejected the use of "mass tactics" to attempt a breakthrough on the Western Front. Instead, he chose to deploy a relatively small number of troops backed by a powerful artillery force. The artillery rather than the infantry was to be the main striking arm. Generally, the tactics employed by the attack corps in their initial assaults reflected this idea. The assaulting infantry "hugged" the artillery bombardment, advancing to within a short distance of the falling shells.[106] In this way, they were able to rush the French positions as soon as the artillery shifted their fire to more distant targets. To reduce further the time the advancing infantry was exposed to possible enemy defensive fire, patrols went forward and cleared and marked lanes of advance through the French wire.[107] Further, German long-range artillery was largely successful in isolating the foremost French positions from the rear, making reinforcement almost impossible. These tactics were successful at keeping the German casualties to a minimum while maximizing the enemy's losses.

However, already at the offensive's beginning, Knobelsdorf's concept of how the attack was to be conducted vied with Falkenhayn's tactical ideas. The 5th Army's attack order of 27 January had allowed the commanders of the attack corps to choose for themselves how they would conduct their battle. The order allowed for either a procedure along the lines of Falkenhayn's ideas or for an attack along the 5th Army's concept of a rapid assault carried out with all possible strength. Consequently, the General Staff Chief's principles were sometimes ignored by the attacking troops. For instance, already on the third day of the offensive, the 6th Division of the III Corps ordered its troops to attack and take the Herbebois "regardless of casualties." On the same day, the III Corps' other division, the 5th, sent its troops into the attack on Wavrille with its band playing "Prussia's Glory" and "Yorck's March."[108] The Reichsarchiv's work on the battle recalled the bloody assault by the Prussian Guards during the Franco-Prussian War by naming the attack by the 5th Division's neighbour on Wavrille a "St. Privat assault."[109]

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[106] See Brandis, op.cit., p.8; Gudmundsson, On Artillery, p.60.
[107] "Die deutsche Taktik bei Verdun," M-W Nr.66-67 (1916) pp. 1610-1612. This unsigned article also ridicules French reports that Germans were using "infiltration tactics" at Verdun.
[108] Kabisch, Verdun, pp. 70-71.
[109] Gold, Verdun I, pp. 111-114; Horne, op.cit., p.96.

Increasingly, the units of the 5th Army followed Knobelsdorf's concept rather than Falkenhayn's, especially as new units were drafted in to continue the offensive.

Disturbed by the growing losses and the disregard for the original tactical ideas, Falkenhayn issued a *Denkschrift* to the units of the 5th Army in mid-March in an effort to convince them to employ tactics which limited German casualties as far as possible.[110] Drawing on the experience of the battle so far, the General Staff Chief advocated the increased use of "*Stoßtruppe*," over the traditional attack waves used by many units. These *Stoßtruppe* were to be made up of one or two squads of select infantry with a combat engineering squad under the command of a company commander.[111] They were to be liberally armed with automatic weapons and hand grenades and, if needed, with trench mortars or flame throwers. Using terrain to mask their advance, these special units were to precede the main body of the attacking infantry and reduce enemy strongpoints that could not be neutralized by artillery fire, thus facilitating the advance of the main body.[112] In another departure from traditional practice, the main body of the infantry was to advance through the enemy positions, leaving strongpoints and pockets of resistance to be reduced by following troops.

Falkenhayn also had much to say about artillery. In general, he wrote, "the psychological effect of the heavy artillery is very great." However, while the *Feldartillerie* worked very well with the infantry, the *Fußartillerie* did not do so well. He recommended better links between the two arms, advising that "mixed battle groups of heavy and *Feldartillerie* under the direction of a single commander and, as far as possible, with common observers and communication with the infantry is more effective than the two operating on their own." The General Staff Chief also stressed the importance of concentrating widely dispersed artillery batteries on specific targets. To facilitate this, he wrote that the artillery should be controlled by an officer in the corps headquarters, who was only to release special artillery battle groups to the divisions on a task by task basis.[113]

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[110] Erich von Falkenhayn, "Einige Erfahrungen aus den Kämpfen im Maasgebiet," Nr.27956 op., 15 March 1916, BA/MA, W10/51534.

[111] Falkenhayn cautioned against using combat engineers in infantry roles; they were specialist troops to be used for clearing obstacles, strongpoints, etc.

[112] For the impact of Verdun on the development of "stormtroop tactics" see Gudmundsson, Strormtroop Tactics, pp. 55-75; Gruss, op.cit., pp. 28-35.

[113] These methods presaged those that would be used by the Germans effectively in the March 1918 offensives. See David Zabecki, Steel Wind: Colonel Georg Bruchmüller and the Birth of Modern Artillery (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994).

As the battle continued, Falkenhayn issued other *Denkschriften* along similar lines. In mid-April, he again returned to the concept of close infantry/artillery co-operation and advised that the infantry advance as close as possible behind the artillery bombardment:

> Sie drangen also in die Gräben des Gegners fast gleichzeitig mit dem letzten Einschlägen vor Vorverlegung des Feuers ein. Wo hierdurch Verluste durch die eignen Geschosse eintraten, wurden sie in Kauf genommen, denn sie standen in keinem Vergliech zu denen, die der Angreifer bei zögerndem Handeln erleidet.[114]

While the General Staff Chief acknowledged that this procedure was not new, he felt once again the evidence of the offensive to date had shown that not all units had understood the concept completely, and that it was necessary to stress its importance to the units of the 5th Army.

Once again, however, Falkenhayn's efforts to re-introduce tactics that would keep German casualties to a minimum were undermined by Knobelsdorf, who rejected the step-by-step advance implicit in the General Staff Chief's tactics. Instead, as the battle continued, Knobelsdorf continually pushed his subordinates to maintain the momentum of any assault; in essence, to attack without regard for casualties. Commanders who disagreed with his view point, such as Mudra, were sacked.[115] This approach further exacerbated German casualties.

In another effort to keep German casualties to a minimum, Falkenhayn also tried to influence German defensive tactics. As the German front line was clearly visible to French observers, it could be taken under accurate artillery fire. Therefore, the General Staff Chief advised the front line formations to thin out their first line. Instead, they were to concentrate the main defense on the second line. There, the defensive position was to become more responsive to French attacks. Machineguns were to be set up with interlocking fields of fire. Each man was to know his position during an attack and was to have a specific zone of the battlefield to cover. From the second line, immediate counter-attacks were to be launched to re-take the first line if it fell to the enemy. Falkenhayn also drew upon the German experience of French fire to outline the use of artillery in the defense. At the first signs of an attack, German artillery was to begin bombarding French trenches and assembly points. At the onset of an attack, the artillery

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[114] Falkenhayn, "Entwurf," Nr.26648 op., 14 April 1916, W10/50705.
[115] Heymann to Ernst Kabisch, 28 August 1935, BA/MA, W10/51523; Wendt, op.cit., p.127.

was to cut off the attacking infantry from behind with a barrage [*Sperrfeuer*], which was to be prepared before hand.[116] Falkenhayn hoped this way to inflict the greatest possible number of casualties on the French during their frequent counter-attacks.

However, the General Staff Chief's efforts to reduce casualties by better defensive tactics was largely unsuccessful. As with the German attacks, casualties largely came from artillery fire, rather than infantry action. The exposed position of the German defenders kept them vulnerable to French fire, which was able to range over the first and second lines as well as the lines of communication easily. The report of the Chief of Staff of the X Reserve Corps on 13 May is typical of the situation: "The troops lie day and night under the *Trommelfeuer* of the enemy artillery. The average daily loss of the three divisions is 230 men. The construction of deeper firing and communications trenches...has been continually frustrated by enemy artillery fire."[117]

In the end, Falkenhayn's efforts to reduce German casualties did not produce great results. In part, this was caused by the 5th Army's insistence that each attack be pressed home with all possible vigour. More importantly, the 5th Army's poor tactical position forced them to attack under unfavorable conditions. Until the French could be forced from the commanding position on the Meuse Heights, the 5th Army would be subject to the effects of heavy French artillery fire and would go on losing large numbers of casualties. Forced to continue its assaults and unwilling to institute tactics which would limit casualties, the 5th Army ultimately faced the same attrition as their French enemy.

Conclusion

At the offensive's beginning, Falkenhayn had hoped his operational attrition would result in France loosing quite rapidly her will to resist. This, however, did not happen. The very symbol that compelled France to expend so much life also provided a rallying point for the French nation. Instead of rapid results, Falkenhayn had increasingly to rely upon the effects of a steady haemorrhaging of the French army brought about by a near continuous German offensive. This shift demanded considerably more troops than Falkenhayn had envisioned at the offensive's beginning, and by the end of April, most of

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[116] OHL to all AOKs, Nr.27793op., 12 May 1916, BA/MA, W10/51584.
[117] X.RK to AOK 5, 13 May 1916, quoted in Wendt, op.cit., p.148

the OHL reserve was engaged at Verdun, suffering severe casualties themselves in their effort to wear down the enemy.

Although German casualties were high, the OHL could take solace in their belief that French casualties were much higher. Falkenhayn maintained that they were suffering five dead or wounded for every two Germans. On 11 March, he told Karl Georg von Treutler, the *Auswärtiges Amt* representative in the OHL, that the French had already suffered 100,000 casualties, the equivalent of a "strong army,"[118] and that if they did not surrender Verdun soon they would easily suffer a further 100,000 through the effects of the German artillery.[119] By May, the General Staff Chief believed that France had lost 525,000 to Germany's 250,000,[120] and by the end of the month, he believed the French army was down to as little as 300,000 reserves.[121]

Despite the fact that the Germans were doing considerable damage to the French army, the French were not experiencing the number of casualties assumed by Falkenhayn. The policy instituted by Pétain ensured that the French army was able to withstand the punishment. Pétain had realized quite early that the battle would consume large numbers of French troops and on 9 March, he requested from Joffre a steady supply of reserves. Joffre, afraid of not having enough troops to take part in the planned Anglo-French offensive on the Somme, initially refused Pétain's request. However, Pétain claimed that Verdun could not be held without a "continuous" flow of replacements. Joffre gave in, and Pétain instituted his policy of rapid rotation of units through the battle. If a division took more than 50 percent casualties, it was removed from the front line for rest and re-fit.[122] In this way, the French were able to deal with the frightful level of casualties inflicted by the Germans without the morale of the army breaking.

By the end of April, Falkenhayn had been stalemated by the French. The 5th Army's failure to capture their initial goal, the vitally important heights, had left them in a tactically unfavorable position and had forced them to continue the offensive at a

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[118] Karl Georg von Treutler to Gottlieb von Jagow, AS 926, 11 March 1916, PRO, GFM 34/2589 (Weltkrieg geh. Bd 28).
[119] Treutler to Bethmann, AS 969, 15 March 1916, PRO, GFM 34/2589 (Weltkrieg geh. Bd 28a).
[120] Tappen, "Besprechung," p.8.
[121] Fritz von Lossberg, Meine Tätigkeit im Weltkriege 1914-1918 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1939) p.211f; see also Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 26 May 1916. Wild, as well, believed that "without a doubt, the French losses at Verdun [were] considerably higher" than the German. See Treutler to Jagow, 30 June 1916, PRO, GFM 34/2590 (Weltkrieg geh. Bd.30). On the difficulties both side had in calculating casualties, see Afflerbach, op.cit., p.371f.
[122] Griffiths, op.cit., pp. 25-26.

disadvantage. This failure caused the nature of how the French army was to be "bled white" to be shifted to a much more costly approach, i.e., through continued German attacks and the French counterattacks these prompted, rather than through French counter-attacks into strong German defensive positions. Further, the steps taken by Pétain had ensured that the French army would be able to survive the battering given by the Germans at Verdun. As the spring turned into summer, it looked like the battle would drag on until the army of one side or the other cracked from the strain.[123] However, the stalemate was to be broken by the very element which Falkenhayn had hoped would ultimately result in the collapse of the Entente – a British relief offensive.

[123] Despite the generally good morale of the French, their army was experiencing great strain. In May, Auguste Terrier wrote to Marshal Louis Lyautey: "I have found, in many of our military leaders, the idea that Verdun has devoured the best forces in the army, notably those which we wanted to use in the common offensive...."Quoted in Griffiths, op.cit., p.25.

Chapter Nine:
Verdun: The Failure

As Chapter 7 has shown, Falkenhayn's strategy for 1916 had been divided into two phases: first, the assault on Verdun, which was to bind the French reserves in the Verdun salient where they would be relentlessly ground down; second, the German counter-attack to mop up the remains of the Entente armies. Together, these two phases were to break apart the western alliance and pave the way for peace. Although the course of the battle at Verdun slowly caused the General Staff Chief to alter his strategic plan, he never completely gave up hope that the second phase could still be carried out. However, when the necessary precursor to Falkenhayn's counter-offensive, the long-awaited Entente relief offensive, finally did come, it broke with a ferocity that was entirely unexpected and produced completely unanticipated results.

Continued Plans for Falkenhayn's Second Phase

While the 5th Army was engaged in wearing down the French reserves, Falkenhayn waited anxiously for an Entente relief offensive to fall elsewhere. Shortly after the beginning of the offensive, when it seemed likely that the 5th Army would quickly reach its initial goals, he began asking the armies of the *Westheer* for their assessments of the situation before their fronts and for plans for offensives.[1] These began arriving in early March.[2]

Of the many plans, Falkenhayn paid the closest attention to the 6th Army, where, as we have seen in Chapter 7, he thought the Entente relief offensive would most likely take place. Already on 27 February, the General Staff Chief had requested an assessment of the situation and plans for an offensive from the 6th Army.[3] They had replied the next day with a *Denkschrift* already prepared by Hermann von Kuhl entitled "Der

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[1] Erich von Falkenhayn, General Headquarters and Its Critical Decisions, 1914-1916 (London: Hutchinson, 1919) p.235; Gerhard Tappen, Meine Kriegserinnerungen, unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/50661, p.178.

[2] For their details, see Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg Bd. X: Die Operationen des Jahres 1916 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1936) pp. 279-281.

Durchbruch."[4] In this, Kuhl cogently outlined the difficulties and requirements of a breakthrough operation. However, given that Falkenhayn had previously rejected such a tactically ambitious plan and had ordered the 6th Army to prepare for an offensive using only limited forces, it is not clear what Kuhl's intentions were in sending this curious *Denkschrift*. With the offensive at Verdun still underway, there was even less of a possibility that Falkenhayn would release the 24 divisions and numerous heavy artillery batteries needed for the plan. Quite possibly, Kuhl wanted to make Falkenhayn aware of the different opinion still held by the 6th Army of the possibilities of any serious results coming from a counter-attack following an Entente relief offensive.[5]

In the meantime, the assault on the heights along the right bank of the Meuse had come to a standstill as the French poured in reserves to hold their position. As Chapter 8 has shown, the OHL was forced to acquiesce to the 5th Army's requests for additional troops to expand the offensive to the heights on the left bank in order to restart the stalled offensive. With this attack underway, Falkenhayn visited the 6th Army to assess the situation there for himself on 8 March.[6] At this meeting, the 6th Army's command once more expressed their long-held doubts that the Entente would undertake an ill-prepared counter-attack, and they attempted to impress upon Falkenhayn the forces they thought necessary to conduct an operation which would "bring mobility once again to the front." Kronprinz Rupprecht and his chief of staff stated their belief that the front before the 6th Army was too thickly occupied by the enemy to achieve a meaningful result with the eight divisions promised by the OHL. Indeed, the ground they covered was so familiar that Kuhl was unclear why the General Staff Chief had made the visit. Their talk resulted in no clear decisions for the future. Falkenhayn declared that the OHL did not have the number of divisions requested by the 6th Army. Further, he expressed once again his doubts about the efficacy of a large-scale breakthrough attempt. At its conclusion, Kuhl recognized clearly the strategic dilemma facing Falkenhayn. Germany could not gather

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[3] Kronprinz Rupprecht von Bayern, Mein Kriegstagebuch vol.1 (ed. Eugen von Frauenholz) (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1929) p.432 (diary entry for 27 February).
[4] AOK 6, "Der Durchbruch," Nr.41494, 26 February 1916, BA/MA, W10/51520; Hermann von Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 28 February 1916, BA/MA, W10/50652.
[5] Both Rupprecht and Kuhl still felt that a hasty relief offensive was unlikely. See Rupprecht, Kriegstagebuch I, pp. 431-432 (diary entry for 23 February 1916); and Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 3 March 1916.
[6] Gerhard Tappen, "Kriegstagebuch," 8 and 9 March 1916, BA/MA, Tappen Nachlass, N56/1.

sufficient forces to achieve a breakthrough without making the other fronts dangerously weak. He was forced to ask, "how should we ... win the war?"[7]

However, even after Falkenhayn's discouraging visit to Douai, the 6th Army continued to plan for an offensive using the eight divisions promised by the OHL. On 16 March, they sent another proposal to Mézières. The goal of this proposed offensive was the capture of Arras. As the British had just taken over this sector of the front from the French 10th Army, the 6th Army believed that the time was right for an offensive – the British reserve was at its lowest and they did not know their new positions well. If the city could be taken, the 6th Army believed it would make a great psychological impact upon the Entente. They wrote:

> Ein gelungener Schlag gegen die Engländer, der diesen das von den Franzosen so zäh verteidigte Arras entreissen würde, dürfte daher grossen Eindruck machen, noch dazu in einer Zeit, wo man alle unsere Kräfte vor Verdun gebunden glaubt, und wo der Stimmung in England sich anscheinend eine gewisse Flauheit bemerkbar macht.[8]

The 6th Army wanted to launch a two-pronged attack north and south of the city. Due to artillery limitations, this attack would have to take place in two parts. First, they hoped to seize the heights at Ecurie to the Scarpe. After this position was taken, the heavy artillery would be shifted to support an attack south of the city. The army would need at least 20 additional heavy batteries and munitions for a 5-day battle, as well as the eight divisions from the OHL reserve. They believed they could be ready to launch the offensive in two to three weeks.[9]

On 19 March, Kuhl was ordered to Mézières for a meeting with Falkenhayn. The General Staff Chief ordered Kuhl to make all preparations for the attack on Arras. However, Falkenhayn told Kuhl that the 6th Army's attack would be dependent on the course of the offensive against Verdun. If things went well there, Falkenhayn promised 30 additional heavy batteries to the 6th Army, which would allow for the two-pronged attack to take place simultaneously.[10] So once again, the decision was postponed.

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[7] Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 8 March 1916; Rupprecht, Kriegstagebuch I, pp. 435-436 (diary entry for 8 March 1916).
[8] AOK 6, "Angriff bei Arras," Ia Nr.282g., 16 March 1916, BA/MA, W10/50705; reprinted in Rupprecht, Kriegstagebuch III, pp. 82-84.
[9] See Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 16 March 1916. Kuhl wrote that he did not believe the OHL would go for their plan.
[10] Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 20 March 1916.

By the end of March, even Falkenhayn was forced to admit that an Entente relief offensive was not likely to come quickly and that the overall situation on the front would not permit a great German success resulting from the employment of limited forces.[11] Further, the operation at Verdun was drawing in more and more of the OHL's reserves, reducing the forces available for a second undertaking. The prospects of the second phase of Falkenhayn's strategy occurring began to fade into the background as the *Verblutung* of the enemy reserves looked likely to take longer than anticipated. Although as Chapter 8 has shown Falkenhayn clearly had his doubts about the action at Verdun, it was increasingly difficult for him to break off the offensive, especially as there was no prospect of success anywhere else. With an Entente relief offensive unlikely and great numbers of troops tied in Verdun, the idea of a second offensive transformed into a secondary offensive with limited goals.

Thus, in early April, Falkenhayn revived the 6th Army's Arras attack plan. On 4 April, he telegraphed the 6th Army, asking them whether or not they would be prepared to launch their offensive. In the meantime, however, the OHL reserve had been depleted by the Verdun offensive and Falkenhayn inquired whether the offensive could be conducted with four rather than eight additional divisions. In their stead, the General Staff Chief proposed reinforcement through additional heavy artillery batteries.[12]

The 6th Army answered immediately. They did not feel that the number of additional divisions would be sufficient to capture Arras. They did believe that the four divisions plus the artillery reinforcement would enable them to capture Loos, although it would not have the same psychological result. The 6th Army stated that they would require at least 3 weeks to make the necessary preparations.[13] They had already issued the required orders for the preparation of the attack on Loos, when Falkenhayn's reply arrived on 10 April. To their surprise, the General Staff Chief ordered them to continue preparations for the attack on Arras.[14]

Accordingly, the 6th Army updated their plan for the seizure of Arras. The situation before the 6th Army had altered since they last planned for the attack. The British had had the time to strengthen their positions, rebuilding the poorly constructed

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[11] Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, p.179. Cf. Holger Afflerbach, Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich (Munich: Oldenburg, 1994) p.373f.
[12] Falkenhayn to AOK 6, OHL Nr.26234op., 6 April 1916, BA/MA, W10/51534; Der Weltkrieg X, p.294.
[13] AOK 6 to OHL, Ia Nr. 291, 6 April 1916, BA/MA, W10/51534; Rupprecht, Kriegstagebuch I, pp. 443-445 (diary entry for 6 April 1916).

French trenches in a way which made the attack much more difficult. Accordingly, although they believed eight additional divisions would suffice, the 6th Army raised their requirement for heavy artillery. Once again, they planned to take the city in two stages, launching first a northern and then a southern attack.[15]

However, once more, events at Verdun forced a postponement of the Arras attack, this time permanently. By the end of April, most of the OHL reserve was engaged at Verdun, including all of the OHL's modern heavy artillery.[16] Falkenhayn was forced to put aside any idea of a secondary attack, at least until the *Zermürbungsschlacht* had reached its conclusion.

Just as Falkenhayn had begun to give up the possibility of carrying out his strategy's second phase any time soon, the signs of an enemy relief offensive began to appear. In early April, the 2nd Army began reporting that the British before their front were making preparations for a large-scale attack; they were digging jumping-off trenches and were ranging their artillery.[17]

The Entente Relief Offensives

The preparations observed by the 2nd Army were, in fact, the beginnings of the long-planned Battle of the Somme. At a conference at Chantilly, France, between 6 and 8 December 1915 the Entente leaders arrived upon a common strategy for 1916. Like Falkenhayn, they had decided on a two-phased approach; first, to wear down the German reserves; second, powerful, co-ordinated attacks launched on the Western and Eastern Fronts to achieve victory. Time, however, was needed to build the British army to the necessary strength and to reorganize the Russian army, still smarting after a disastrous 1915. A second conference in mid-February 1916 between the French and the British had worked out the outlines of the western offensive. The two allies were to attack at the point of the juncture of their two armies, along the Somme River. The French were to contribute 40 divisions and attack along a 40-km front, while 25 British divisions attacked along a 22-km front. The offensive was scheduled to begin on 1 July.[18]

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[14] Falkenhayn to AOK 6, No Akten Nr, BA/MA, W10/51534; Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 11 April 1916.
[15] AOK 6, "Doppelangriff bei Arras," Ia Nr.301geh., 17 April 1916, BA/MA, W10/51520.
[16] At the end of April, the OHL reserve consisted of only eight divisions. Der Weltkrieg X, p.298.
[17] Ibid., p.295.
[18] James E. Edmonds, ed. Military Operations: France and Belgium 1916 Vol.1: Sir Douglas Haig's Command to the 1st July: Battle of the Somme (London: MacMillan, 1932) pp. 1-35.

However, the German offensive at Verdun had a great impact on the planned Anglo-French offensive. Immediately after the German attack, Marshal Joseph Joffre requested that Douglas Haig relieve the French 10th Army and launch a British relief attack as soon as possible. While Haig agreed to relieve the 10th Army, he did not feel a British offensive would contribute much to taking the pressure off the French at Verdun. The British commander-in-chief wanted to marshal his forces for the main offensive later in the year.[19] As the Verdun offensive wore on and the French army suffered more and more casualties, the French contribution to the joint offensive diminished. By 1 May, the French army had lost over 130,000 men and had rotated 42 divisions through the "*Maasmühle*." With such losses, they were forced to lower their commitment to the offensive to 30 rather than 40 divisions. Later the same month, the French contribution fell to 22 divisions, and Joffre again asked Haig to move forward the offensive in the wake of the German seizure of Fort Vaux.[20] At a meeting on 26 May, Joffre expressed the strain felt by the French army when he declared to Haig that "the French army would cease to exist," if the Anglo-French offensive were not carried out by 1 July at the latest.[21]

The Germans were well aware of the declining French commitment to the joint offensive, and Falkenhayn saw this as a sign that the *Verblutung* of the French army was succeeding. However, it is clear that the OHL also overestimated the effects of Verdun and underestimated the enemy. Already in March, incoming reports spoke of the reduced number of French divisions taking part in the impending offensive. Karl Georg von Treutler reported, somewhat prematurely, from the OHL that "it is barely conceivable that the French can take their place in the great spring offensive."[22] Over the next few months, Falkenhayn continued this train of thought. In April, Werner Freiherr von Grünau was able to report that, although the French might have enough reserves to carry out an offensive, they did not have the heavy artillery needed to bring significant results.[23]

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[19] Ibid., pp. 36-37; B.H. Liddell Hart, The Real War 1914-1918 (London: Faber & Faber, 1930) p. 247f.
[20] Ministère de la Guerre, Les Armées Françaises dans la Grande Guerre Tome IV: Vol.2: La Bataille de Verdun et les offensives des Alliés (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1933), pp. 171-188.
[21] Douglas Haig, The Private Papers of Douglas Haig, 1914-1919 (Robert Blake, ed.) (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1952) pp. 144-145 (diary entry for 26 May 1916); A.H. Farrar-Hockley, The Somme (London: Pan Books, 1966; first published, 1964), p.70; Cf. Les Armées Françaises IV/2, p.175.
[22] Karl Georg von Treutler to Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, 17 March 1916, (copied from Kriegführung Nr.15/Band 1), BA/MA, W10/51543.
[23] Werner Freiherr von Grünau to Bethmann, 17 April 1916, (copied from Reichskanzlei. Weltkrieg 1914/18. 15. Allg.Milit,- und Marine-Berichte aus dem Gr.H.Qu. Band 1) BA/MA, W10/51543.

In May, Falkenhayn insisted that the attack on Verdun had reduced the planned Entente offensive substantially, as the French were no longer in any position to take part with any great numbers of troops.[24]

With the attention of the OHL focused totally on the Western Front, it was the Russians who surprised everyone (including themselves) by achieving unexpected success with their offensive in June. On the evening of 5 June, Falkenhayn began receiving disturbing messages from the Austro-Hungarian AOK. The first arrived from Conrad, who informed Falkenhayn that "the attack of the entire Russian Southwest Front [had begun] on 4 June." Consequently, the Austrian General Staff Chief requested Falkenhayn reinforce the southern Eastern Front from the forces of OberOst, as had been agreed on 23 May.[25] Falkenhayn, intent not to be drawn away from the Western Front and sceptical as ever of the Austrians, declined this shifting of reserves, insisting that the Russian forces facing OberOst were far superior and, therefore, none could be spared.[26] Conrad's messages were followed shortly after by two from *Generalleutnant* August von Cramon, the German liaison officer in the AOK. Cramon's messages carried the first reports of the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army, and a further personal request for German reinforcement.[27]

Although Falkenhayn was reluctant to be distracted by the Eastern Front, the situation was rapidly deteriorating there. On 5 June, the four Russian armies of General Alexei Brusilov's Southwest Front launched what was intended to be a secondary attack for a relief offensive for Italy. However, they achieved a completely unexpected success, as the Russian 8th Army broke through the three defensive positions and practically annihilated the Austro-Hungarian 4th Army. On the first day alone, the Austro-Hungarian

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[24] Erich von Luckwald to Bethmann, 12 May 1916, (copied from Reichskanzlei, Weltkrieg 15/1) BA/MA, W10/51543. See also Falkenhayn's comments at the *Chefbesprechung* of 26 May. Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 26 May; Fritz von Loßberg, Meine Tätigkeit im Weltkrieg 1914-1918 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1939) pp. 221-212.

[25] Conrad to Falkenhayn, AOK Op.Nr.25770, 5 June 1916, BA/MA, W10/51519. The Central Powers had been aware of the impending Russian offensive, but expected it, like the earlier Russian offensive at Lake Narotch, to come to nothing. See Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.241; Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 437-439; Afflerbach, op.cit., p.411f.

[26] Falkenhayn to Conrad, OHL Nr.28852op., 5 June 1916, BA/MA, W10/51519; Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.244f. Falkenhayn claimed that there were 1200 Russian battalions along OberOst's front as opposed to 232 battalions along *Heeresgruppe Prinz Leopold*'s front. He was, in fact, correct. Two-thirds of the Russian army, 1400 battalions, were still deployed against the German sector of the front. See Holger Herwig, The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918 (London: Arnold, 1997) p.208.

[27] Wilhelm Solger, "Die Oberste Heeresleitung in der Führung der Westoperationen Ende 1915 bis Ende August 1916: VII. Vom 5.Juni – 30.Juni 1916. Vom Eintreffen der Nachrichten über den Erfolg der

X Corps lost 80 percent of its effectives and the Corps Szurmay to its south was almost as badly treated. By the offensive's second day, Russian troops had penetrated the Austrian reserve position and had advanced around 20 kilometers to the 4th Army's headquarters at Lutsk. All along the Austro-Hungarian/Russian front, the Russian attackers achieved notable successes, if not as sweeping as those of the 8th Army. By 12 June, the Russians could report that they had taken large numbers of prisoners. The four Russian armies that had taken part in Brusilov's offensive had captured close to 193,000 officers and men. With casualties, the Austro-Hungarian army on the Eastern Front had lost over half of their strength.[28]

However, the scale and the nature of the defeat was slow in filtering through the Central Powers' chain of command. Falkenhayn had responded negatively to Cramon's personal plea for assistance on 5 June, repeating his assertion that OberOst was in no position to send reinforcements. He added: "Also in the west, where I daily await an English attack, reserves are not available." He suggested that the Austro-Hungarians give up their Italian offensive to find the necessary reinforcement.[29] Over the next several days, however, the true picture of the defeat became clear. The German General Staff Chief was forced on 7 June to relinquish part of his western reserve (one corps) to help restore the position in the east, and after meeting Conrad on 8 June decided a further two divisions would be necessary to stabilize the front.[30]

Despite the scale of the defeat in the east, perhaps not fully recognized in Mézières, the OHL was clearly optimistic about the prospects for ultimate victory.[31] On 9 June, Adolf Wild von Hohenborn recorded the opportunity the Brusilov offensive offered the Central Powers:

> Der russische Vorstoss muss ein Sieg für uns werden. Das im Osten zusammengeraffte Korps Bernhardi und das X. Armeekorps genügen nicht. Ich rate, noch die 11. bayerische Reserve-Division, die 3. Garde-Division und noch zwei Korps hinzuschicken. Das muss ein schneller, energischer Schlag werden, der den Russen zeigt, dass die Zeit ihrer Offensivideen vorüber ist, und der Welt

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Brussilow-Offensive bis zum Vorabend der Sommeschlacht (30.Juni)," unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/51592, p.365.

[28] Bundesministerium für Landesverteidigung, Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg Bd.IV: Das Kriegsjahr 1916 (Vienna: Verlag der Militärwissenschaftlichen Mitteilungen, 1933) pp. 375-403; Norman Stone, The Eastern Front, 1914-1917 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975) p.254; Herwig, op.cit., pp. 208-217.

[29] Falkenhayn to Cramon, 5 June 1916, quoted in Solger, op.cit., p.365. On 15 May, Conrad's long-desired offensive against Italy on the Asiago Plateau had begun, involving 14 divisions, including 6 removed from the Eastern Front. See Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg IV, pp. 253-349; Herwig, op.cit., pp. 204-207.

[30] Der Weltkrieg X, p.457. A further five divisions were dispatched from OberOst.

[31] For the OHL's attitude towards the Russian offensive, see Afflerbach, op.cit., pp. 415ff.

> und den Rumänen beweist, dass Russland hinter seinem Graben zu bleiben hat. Inzwischen mag Verdun, wo sich die Verhältnisse in der letzten Zeit ganz gut entwickelt haben, weiter betrieben werden, während die Kenntnis unserer Abtransporte aus dem Westen *hoffentlich die Engländer endlich zum Angriff reizt. Geht alles gut, können wir etwa im August immer noch im Westen einen guten Schlag führen.*[32]

Clearly, the offensive was seen by some in the OHL as an opportunity to settle the score with Russia once and for all. The day after Wild recorded the above opinion in his diary, he outlined how he would accomplish this: The German attack group would "slice off" Brusilov's salient, destroying the Russian force therein.[33] Falkenhayn was again faced with the question of whether to send troops for a potentially decisive counter-offensive in the east or to retain forces to meet the impending Entente offensive in the west.

Falkenhayn appears never to have taken Wild's idea of a powerful eastern counter-offensive seriously.[34] His eyes continued to be set firmly on the Western Front, and he rejected sending more forces than were absolutely necessary to the east. On 24 June, he informed OberOst that he still expected that the war's decision would fall in France.[35] The General Staff Chief was supported in this belief by Gerhard Tappen, who on 21 June had drawn up an assessment of Germany's strategic situation. His report began with the assumption that the war could only be settled in the west. He continued, "a decision in the west cannot be achieved when the English are met purely defensively. When the English attack and storm [*Angriff und Ansturm*] is broken, they must be driven back."[36]

Indeed, through June, the intentions of the Western Allies had become clearer. On 14 June, the *Nachrichtenabteilung* (N-Abt) reported that 20-22 British divisions were preparing to attack the 2nd Army north of the Somme. An additional, diversionary attack was expected west or southwest of Lens.[37] Several days later, the N-Abt reported that the French role in the offensive would not merely be limited to a diversionary attack, but would include a major effort south of the Somme. For this attack, the French had 19

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[32] Adolf Wild von Hohenborn, "Kriegstagebuch," 9 June 1916, BA/MA, Wild Nachlass, N44/2. Emphasis added.
[33] Wild, "Kriegstagebuch," 10 June 1916.
[34] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, pp. 247ff.
[35] Falkenhayn to OberOst, 24 June 1916, quoted in Der Weltkrieg X, p.320.
[36] Gerhard Tappen, "Beurteilung der Lage am 21.6.1916," printed in Solger, op.cit., pp. 383-384.
[37] Nachrichtenabteilung West, "Vortrags-Notizen, England," 14 June 1916, BA/MA, W10/51592.

divisions in reserve (although only 6 "white" and 2 "colored" divisions of these had not been through Verdun), but almost no heavy artillery.[38]

Both Wild's diary entry and Tappen's assessment demonstrate that the OHL had not given up their idea of a counter-attack following the successful defense of an Entente offensive. The increasing signs of the impending Somme offensive had, in fact, given new hope to this phase of Falkenhayn's strategy. The General Staff Chief was, however, running up against the same problem that he had faced since he had taken over directing Germany's strategy – a lack of reserves. As the Entente preparatory bombardment began on 24 June, the N-Abt gave their final assessment of the Western Allies' dispositions. They believed that the offensive would fall primarily against the 2nd Army on a front between Monchy au Bois in the north to the Avre in the south. In total, the N-Abt believed that the Entente had deployed 39-41 divisions, together with a large force of artillery.[39] Facing this enemy concentration were the 13 divisions of *Generaloberst* Fritz von Below's 2nd Army.

To marshal the necessary forces for the defense against the Entente attack and for any subsequent counter-attack, Tappen had written in his assessment of 21 June that the German involvement in the east should be limited to only the smallest possible force and reserves should be gathered for the task. Indeed, Falkenhayn had begun doing just that. Already on 9 June, he had telegraphed Conrad to report that no further forces could be sent to the east as the situation in the west "is so serious that all the available reserves must be sent to the threatened front."[40] This was reinforced by Falkenhayn on 24 June, when he telegraphed OberOst that no additional troops would be forthcoming from the west.[41] The General Staff Chief began looking for forces from other areas of the Western Front, including Verdun. On 24 June, he sent the following message to the 5th Army:

> Die allgemeine Lage lässt es dringend wünschwert erscheinen, den Menschen-, Material- und Munitionsverbrauch bei der Heeresgruppe entschieden einzuschränken. Stellungnahme erbeten, wie dieses Ziel angestrebt werden kann, nachdem nunmehr durch Einnahme von Pw.Thiaumont, Fleury und des Vorgeländes vor Fort Vaux ein gewisser Abschnitt erreicht worden ist.[42]

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[38] Solger, op.cit., pp. 377-378.
[39] Nachrichtenabteilungen West, "Vortrags-Notizen," 24 June 1916, BA/MA, W10/51592.
[40] Falkenhayn to Conrad, OHL Nr.28981op., 9 June 1916, BA/MA, W10/51529.
[41] Falkenhayn to OberOst, 24 June 1916, quoted in Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 320-321. Although Wild wrote that "Falkenhayn schwankt betr. des Feldzugs im Osten hin und her," (Wild, "Kriegstagebuch," 26 June 1916), it is obvious from his messages to OberOst and AOK that he never intended to launch a large-scale offensive there.
[42] Falkenhayn to AOK 5, Nr.29769op., 24 June 1916, printed in Der Weltkrieg X, p.195.

Further, Falkenhayn began stripping other armies of units to add to the OHL reserve. The 3rd Army was forced to give up a division and the 7th Army created a division out of battalions removed from its units.[43] However, even with the measures taken, the Germans could only gather 12 divisions as a reserve force, 4 of which were placed at the disposal of the 2nd Army by the end of June.[44]

With hindsight, it is clear that the Germans were facing one of the most trying phases of the war in late June 1916. At the time, however, the strategic situation seemed fairly promising to the OHL.[45] The Germans had never taken the Russian offensive seriously, and, indeed, it had apparently been contained by mid-June.[46] Further, the Verdun offensive had achieved good results with the attack on Fleury on 22/23 June.[47] Although the French were taking part in the Somme offensive, the Verdun offensive had seemingly reduced their contribution to a token force. Therefore, the brunt of the offensive would fall to the inexperienced British, whom, as Chapter 7 has shown, the Germans had rated poorly at the beginning of the year. Nothing had happened between January and June to change their assessment of the tactical worth of the "Kitchener divisions."

To meet this attack, Falkenhayn had reinforced the 2nd Army with four divisions and a good deal of artillery from the OHL reserve. The long and obvious Entente preparatory period allowed the Germans to know almost exactly where the attack would fall. Below's army had ample time to reinforce their field positions. The defensive lessons drawn from the *Herbstschlacht* were circulated throughout the *Westheer*, and the

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[43] Der Weltkrieg X, p.348.
[44] Ibid., pp. 319-320. The Reichsarchiv lists only seven divisions remaining in the OHL reserve after reinforcement of the 2nd Army. They appear to have overlooked the 123rd Infantry Division, which was deployed behind the 4th Army. (See "Die Front gegen Frankreich: Stand am 1.Juli 1916 morgens," Map 4, Der Weltkrieg X.)
[45] For Falkenhayn's optimism, see Georg von Müller, The Kaiser and His Court: The Diaries and Letters of Admiral Georg Alexander von Müller, Chief of the Naval Cabinet, 1914-1918 (ed. Walter Görlitz) (London: MacDonald, 1959), diary entry for 20 June 1916, p.174; Afflerbach, op.cit., p.416.
[46] In the event, the Russian advance was stopped more by Russian logistical difficulties and timidity than by the efforts of the Central Powers. Stone, op.cit., pp. 255ff. This point seems to have been recognized by the OHL as well. Wild wrote, "die Russen scheinen über ihren leichten Erfolg selbst so erstaunt, dass sie nicht wissen, was sie weiter tun sollen." Wild, "Kriegstagebuch," 10 June 1916.
[47] Using the new "Green Cross" gas shells, the Germans had managed to take the fortified village of Fleury on the east bank of the Meuse with relatively little difficulty. Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 186-194; Bruce Gudmundsson, "Counter-Battery Fire: The Case of Fleury," Tactical Notebook March 1992.

2nd Army had constructed the layered defensive system indicated by that experience.[48] Although it was clear that the Entente had considerably superior forces arrayed against the 2nd Army, the situation was far better for the Germans than it had been before any previous Entente offensive. The General Staff Chief could expect that the 2nd Army would be able to withstand the attack from an inexperienced enemy without great difficulty.

Falkenhayn's optimism and his continued desire for a decisive German counter-attack dictated his deployment of the *Westheer* before the Somme offensive. It was clear by the middle of June where the Anglo-French assault would fall. On 15 June, the General Staff Chief had informed the 6th Army's Chief of Staff that the "main attack would fall against the 2nd Army, with a secondary attack at Lens."[49] Despite this knowledge and the knowledge of the enemy forces arrayed against the 2nd Army, Falkenhayn reinforced this army with only four divisions, maintaining eight in the OHL reserve. Further, the 6th Army was not reduced at all to provide reserves for the 2nd Army. Holding a shorter front than Below's army, the 6th Army still consisted of 17 ½ divisions and large amounts of heavy artillery on the eve of the Somme battle. Additionally, the OHL maintained three divisions from its reserve behind the 6th Army's front.[50]

In retrospect, given the outcome of the battle of the Somme, this deployment seems ludicrous. Indeed, to explain this strange deployment, the Reichsarchiv stated after the war that Falkenhayn had misinterpreted where the enemy offensive would take place, writing that he believed the 6th Army would also be attacked.[51] However, there can be only one explanation for leaving such a substantial force deployed away from where the Entente offensive was to fall – Falkenhayn intended to launch his counter-offensive with Kronprinz Rupprecht's army.

Throughout the year, Falkenhayn had favored the offensive plans of the 6th Army for use as his counter-offensive. Now that the British attack was finally coming, the conditions seemed right to implement these plans. Although the 6th Army's original plan for a counter-offensive had recommended attacking at the point of the unsuccessful

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[48] For an example of the changes implemented after the *Herbstschlacht*, see AOK 2, "Experience Gained From the September Offensives on the Fronts of the Sixth and Third Armies," Ia Nr.290geh., 5 November 1915, British Army Translation, Stationary Service Series (SS) 454. (My thanks to Dr. Martin Samuels for a copy of this document.)

[49] Kuhl, "Kriegstagebuch," 15 June 1916.

[50] Solger, op.cit., p.397.

[51] Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 317-318. See also Afflerbach, op.cit., p.419.

Entente attack, it had also explored the possibility of attacking another, weakly held portion of the front.[52] Falkenhayn could assume that the British would attack on the Somme with their best divisions, leaving the remainder of their front occupied by second-rate and inexperienced formations; thus presenting the 6th Army with an opportunity to counter-attack the British at a point of the front held by ineffective units.[53] With the British reserves destroyed during their offensive and the French army depleted by the continuing action at Verdun, the General Staff Chief could expect any local breakthrough achieved by the 6th Army to turn into a strategic success.

After the war, Tappen maintained that throughout the summer the OHL had kept a number of their "best" divisions available for this counter-offensive.[54] He described how he, Falkenhayn, and Wild had continually discussed how to employ these formations most effectively.[55] Now, as the Somme offensive was about to begin, a number of these divisions were deployed with, or in the area of, the 6th Army, ready to launch a counter-offensive once the British had exhausted themselves in their offensive to the south.[56]

Intriguingly, however, the General Staff Chief had not yet made definite plans for the employment of the reinforced 6th Army by the beginning of the Somme. This can, in part, be explained by Falkenhayn's secrecy. After the war, Tappen remembered how the two men would often outline different plans for the employment of these reserves on a blackboard at the OHL. To keep them secret, however, the blackboard would be wiped clean once the two had finished their conversation.[57] The fact that plans had already been drawn up by the 6th Army for a counter-offensive would also have contributed to Falkenhayn's reluctance to be drawn any further into details. All that was needed was for these plans to be updated. The offensive at Gorlice had shown how quickly a large-scale operation could be organized and launched.

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[52] AOK 6 to OHL, Ia Nr.267g., 24 January 1916, BA/MA, W10/51520. See Chapter 7, p.182.
[53] See Tappen, Kriegserinnerungen, p.189.
[54] Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 21 October 1932, BA/MA, N56/5; Idem, Kriegerinnerungen, pp. 189-190.
[55] Idem, "Besprechung mit dem Generalleutnant a.D. Tappen im Reichsarchiv am 6.IX.1932," N56/5, p.2 (Hereafter, Tappen, "Besprechung."); Idem, Kriegserinnerungen, p.197.
[56] The 17 ½ divisions of the 6th Army included the Guard Reserve Corps, the II Bavarian Corps, IV Army Corps, and the IX Reserve Corps, all rated as "first class" formations by the Entente. Further, the OHL reserve behind the 6th Army included another "first class" unit, the 3rd Guard Division. For the deployment on 1 July 1916, see Der Weltkrieg X, p.319. For this rating of the German units see, US War Office, Histories of the 251 Divisions of the German Army which Participated in the War (London: Naval and Military Press, 1989; originally published 1920). This work is a compilation of the Allied intelligence's assessments of the German divisions.
[57] Tappen, "Bespechung," p.2.

Thus, as the Somme offensive began, the General Staff Chief had set the scene for the decision in the west. The 2nd Army had been reinforced enough that he believed them capable of holding their own in the coming battle. The offensive at Verdun had been scaled back somewhat, but the 5th Army was to keep the pressure on the French to keep their reserves tied down there.[58] Finally, forces for the counter-stroke had been mustered and their deployment had even begun. All that was needed was for the British finally to begin their long-prepared offensive.

The Failure of Falkenhayn's Strategy

On 24 June, the Entente preparatory bombardment began, marking the start of what was to be the greatest test of the *Westheer* since the war's beginning. For the next 8 days, the Entente artillery pounded the German positions. In the British sector alone, the 1,896 artillery pieces and trench mortars of the British 4th Army fired more than 1,732,800 rounds.[59] The British guns were joined by 1,400 French artillery pieces. This opening bombardment signalled that the forthcoming battle was to be, above all, one of material and one that the Germans would have great difficulty countering. Facing the Entente artillery concentration of almost 3,300 artillery pieces was only the 2nd Army's 598 light and 246 heavy guns.[60]

Indeed, the strength of the offensive surprised the OHL considerably. Although the infantry assaults of the initial days had been largely thrown back with great loss to the attackers, the 2nd Army had suffered under the weight of the Entente bombardment, and their early reports spoke of the effectiveness of the enemy fire. Most worryingly, the 2nd Army reported the loss of numerous artillery batteries, crucial elements of the defensive system, to the overwhelming enemy fire.[61] Additionally, the OHL's insistence that any Entente gain be retaken through an immediate counter-thrust drained German units further. Soon, the German defenders were suffering far higher casualties than they had

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[58] On 27 June, the 5th Army had responded to Falkenhayn's call for a restriction of the Verdun offensive by stating that they would carry on with the resources of the 5th Army alone. AOK 5 to OHL, Ia Nr.1657g., 27 June 1916, printed in Wendt, op.cit., p.170.

[59] Military Operations: France and Belgium 1916 I, pp. 300-301; Weltkrieg X, p.340.

[60] Der Weltkrieg X, Anlage 1, "Deutsche und feindliche Artillerie bei Verdun und an der Somme."

[61] Der Weltkrieg X, p.352.

even at the height of the assaults on Verdun. During the offensive's first 10 days alone, the 2nd Army had lost 40,187.[62]

Moreover, even as the Somme offensive was beginning, the Russians scored renewed successes in their offensive against the Austrian front. During June, a complete reorganization of the Eastern Front had taken place. German units from OberOst and the divisions from the OHL reserve had be placed into Austro-Hungarian formations in an effort to increase their combat capability. The local counter-attacks launched by these units, however, did little to stabilize the situation. Once the Russian logistics had caught up with Brusilov's rapid initial advance, the Russians were ready to go again. They continued to punish the Central Powers' forces through late June and early July.[63] To make matters worse, the Russians extended their offensive to the OberOst's sector of the front when General Evert's Western Front attacked on 2 July at Baranovitchi.[64] Given the seemingly precarious situation in the east, calls began for OberOst to take over command of the entire Eastern Front.[65]

By early July, the situation was seen as extremely serious by much of the army's leadership,[66] and on 8 July, Falkenhayn was forced to justify his strategy in an audience with the Kaiser. As this is one of the few contemporary documents showing the General Staff Chief's intentions, it is worth quoting at length. He began by outlining the strategic views with which he had begun the year:

> Unsere Gesamtkriegführung wurde bisher nach folgenden einfachen Gedanken geleitet:
>
> Im Osten schien es bei den inneren Zuständen Russlands genügend, wenn das während des vorigen Jahres Gewonnene im grossen ganzen behauptet wurde.
>
> Im Westen waren wir entschlossen, Frankreich durch Blutabzapfung zur Besinnung zu bringen. England sollte dadurch zum offensiven Vorgehen gezwungen werden, das wie wir hofften, ihm schwere Verluste aber keinen entscheidenden Erfolg und uns später die Gelegenheit zur Gegenoffensive bringen würde.
>
> Auf diese Weise erwarteten wir, den drei Hauptgegnern bis zum Winter die Lust zur Fortführung des Krieges so gründlich verleidet zu haben, dass aus

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[62] Wendt, op.cit., p.176. By way of contrast, during the most costly 10-day period of the Verdun offensive, the Germans had "only" lost 25,989 men.

[63] Oesterreich-Ungarns Letzter Krieg IV, pp. 547-623; Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 469-481.

[64] Stone, op.cit., pp. 259-263; Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 499-503.

[65] See Wild, "Kriegstagebuch," 24 June 1916; Plessen, "Tagebuch," 17 and 25 June 1916. This proposal was energetically rejected by the Kaiser.

[66] Plessen wrote in his diary, "the overall situation is critical..." Plessen, "Tagebuch," 6 July. Similarly, Moriz von Lyncker, the head of the Kaiser's Military Cabinet, wrote to his wife that Germany was facing a "critical time." Lyncker to his wife, 7 July 1916, BA/MA, W10/50676. Cf. Rupprecht, Kriegstagebuch I, pp. 498ff. Falkenhayn himself felt the strain acutely. See Wild, "Kriegstagebuch," 15 July 1916.

solcher Stimmung sich der siegreiche Frieden in irgend einer Form entwickeln musste.

Falkenhayn regretted, however, that the collapse of the Austrians in the east had made this plan much more difficult, if not impossible, to carry out. He rejected the building of a powerful attack group in the east, as was advocated by Wild and others, on the grounds that he did not believe it would reach any real decision. Instead, he wanted to reinforce the Austrians with individual units and re-establish the front there through small-scale counter-attacks. The east would have to hold out with its own resources because "at the moment, we are engaged in the decisive battle in the west." It was in France, not Russia, that the war would be won or lost. Falkenhayn believed that if Germany could hold out on the Somme, then France would be forced to sue for peace, as "in consideration of their manpower, France [could not] endure another winter campaign."[67]

By the end of the first week of July, Falkenhayn's strategy was rapidly unravelling. His audience with the Kaiser indicates that by the end of the first week of the Battle of the Somme, Falkenhayn had given up his idea of a counter-stroke to a failed Entente offensive, and that his strategy for 1916 was unravelling. The Germans just did not have the troops necessary for such an undertaking. The four divisions which the OHL had been forced to send east in early June had depleted their reserve from which any counter-thrust in the west would develop,[68] and the intensity of the Battle of the Somme to date had shown just how much effort would be needed to defend against the Entente assault. By 2 July, Falkenhayn had been forced to send the 2nd Army seven divisions. By 9 July he had sent the 2nd Army an additional seven divisions. These units came from Falkenhayn's precious OHL reserve and from the powerful 6th Army.[69] Falkenhayn's presentation to the Kaiser indicated that the General Staff Chief now believed the war would be won in the west by a successful defense on the Somme, rather than by any German offensive action. In a major change of heart, he now felt that a successful defense would convince the French that they could not defeat the Germans and that there was no longer any alternative but a negotiated peace.

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[67] Erich von Falkenhayn, "Vortrag bei Sr.Majestät am 8. Juli 1916," BA/MA, W10/51584; printed in Wendt, op.cit., pp. 174-176. Cf. Afflerbach, op.cit., p.420f.

[68] Falkenhayn and Tappen later blamed the sending of these divisions to the east for the end of the plans for a western counter-offensive. Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.262; Tappen to Reichsarchiv, 15 May 1931, BA/MA, N56/5.

[69] Der Weltkrieg X, Anlage 3: "Verzeichnis der vom 1.Juli bis Ende August auf dem Kampffelde eingesetzten Generalkommandos und Divisionen, ihre Ablösungen, Verschiebungen und Verluste."

As the summer wore on and the attacks on the Somme increased in their intensity, the situation deteriorated even further. Losses were so high that, in mid-July, Falkenhayn instituted a major reorganization of the *Westheer* designed to free solid units for employment on the Somme. The 6th Army lost most of its best units and the remainder of the OHL reserve was allocated to the 2nd Army. By the end of August, the OHL reserve had been reduced to one division, the Guard Ersatz Division. So many formations were deployed on the Somme that Falkenhayn had split the 2nd Army into two army groups to manage better the battle. Further, the *Westheer*, including the 5th Army, was forced to give up portions of its heavy artillery, thus restricting their offensive capability.[70]

The severe crisis caused by the Entente attacks on both fronts also had a major impact on the 5th Army's offensive at Verdun. While, in consideration of the forthcoming Entente attack, Falkenhayn had ordered the 5th Army to limit their attacks, he agreed to their proposal to make one last effort to take Fort Souville. This was the last major French work remaining on the east bank, and its possession would have meant that the 5th Army had finally reached their territorial goals from the offensive's beginning. With the Meuse Heights on the east bank finally in their hands, the 5th Army would then have been in a strong defensive position and would have been able to dominate Verdun and its environs with their artillery. Further, Falkenhayn had believed that the continuation of the offensive would continue to wear down the French reserves even as the Somme progressed. When the attack on Souville failed on 12 July, the General Staff Chief ordered the 5th Army to go over "strictly to the defensive."[71] The 5th Army was permitted to undertake local attacks to better their tactical position, but no further large-scale assaults were to take place. Falkenhayn hoped that this would give the French the impression that the offensive was still underway, and, hence, would keep large numbers of troops in the Verdun salient.[72] Thus, by the middle of July, Falkenhayn was not only forced to give up his counter-offensive, he was forced to scale back considerably his *Zermürbungsschlacht*.[73]

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[70] On 12 July, Falkenhayn informed the Kaiser that 150 of the 5th Army's modern heavy artillery pieces would be transferred to the Somme front. Plessen recognized that this meant the Verdun operation would be severely restricted. Plessen, "Tagebuch," 12 July 1916.

[71] Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 199ff.

[72] Falkenhayn, General Headquarters, p.268.

[73] Although combat still took place at Verdun, the offensive had largely been ended by this point. It did not drag on in the same manner as before as is often asserted. Horne, op.cit., pp. 277ff; Afflerbach, op.cit., p.418f.

The obvious failure of Falkenhayn's strategy for 1916 had undermined his already weak support with the army. As the situation deteriorated over the summer, the calls for a constriction of his authority, or even for his dismissal, became more vocal. Since June, many, including Falkenhayn's friend Wild, had been advocating that Hindenburg take over command of the entire Eastern Front. By August, the situation had become so threatening that even Falkenhayn's staunchest supporters, the Kaiser's Military Cabinet, had turned against him. With no support for Falkenhayn, the Kaiser was forced, against his better judgement, to replace him with Hindenburg, with Ludendorff as his "*Erster Generalquartiermeister*." On 29 August, the duo from the east took over the direction of Germany's strategic effort,[74] and on 2 September, the new strategic leadership ended once and for all the offensive at Verdun.[75] With Falkenhayn's dismissal came the end of dalliance with *Ermattungsstrategie*. The new leaders refocused German efforts towards bringing about a dictated peace, through a great German battlefield victory. They returned to the ideas of *Vernichtungsstrategie* despite the overwhelming evidence that this could not succeed under the conditions of World War I.

Conclusion

Falkenhayn's attempt to apply *Ermattungsstrategie* had failed miserably. The months-long battle at Verdun designed to drain away French resources had backfired and had, in fact, cost both armies dearly. The most reliable account of the battle's casualties comes from Hermann Wendt's study of Verdun. According to this work, from the offensive's start on 21 February until its end on 31 August, the 5th Army had suffered 281,333 casualties, while the French had suffered around 315,000.[76] Further, the *Westheer* had suffered high numbers of casualties in what had once been the eagerly awaited Entente offensive on the Somme. Thus, Falkenhayn's strategy of wearing down the enemy's reserves had, in fact, led to the near exhaustion of the German army. Instead of peace, Falkenhayn's efforts had led to the darkest hour of the war for Germany. Hindenburg and Ludendorff took over a nearly broken instrument in late August 1916.

With the benefit of hindsight, the battle has been seen by historians as an act of futility, in which large numbers of French and German soldiers lost their lives for no real

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[74] See Afflerbach, op.cit., pp. 424-450; and Afflerbach, "Wilhelm as Supreme Warlord in the First World War," War in History 5 (4) (1998) pp. 440-446.
[75] Wendt, op.cit., p.187.

reason or gain. This view was put forward by German commentators during and after the war, who stressed the General Staff Chief's strategy lacked clear, attainable goals. This common opinion is perhaps best summed by Georg Wetzell:

> Eines vermisst man besonders bei den Falkenhayn'schen Betrachtungen: die grosse Linie eines einheitlichen Handelns, des Zusammenfassens aller verfügbaren Kräfte der Mittelmächte auf ein grosses, gemeinsames Ziel! Nicht mit einem Wort ist irgend etwas Ähnliches in dem Memorandum Falkenhayns zu finden![77]

The writers of the German official history felt similarly, and found confirmation of their opinions in Falkenhayn's handling of the Verdun campaign. To them, Falkenhayn had proved himself an irresolute leader, incapable of making difficult decisions.[78] They represented Falkenhayn as prey to his self-doubts and as overly influenced by the 5th Army command, particularly Schmidt von Knobelsdorf. Central to their argument was that the General Staff Chief had not, in fact, intended to "bleed the French army white" at the outbreak of the operation.[79] Instead, they maintained that this goal came about after the failure of his initial plan of causing the French to strip their front of reserves. In an argument picked up recently by Krumeich, the writers of the official history maintained that only in late March/early April did Falkenhayn arrive at the formulation he later adumbrated in his post-war writings. They concluded that he arrived at this point merely because he could not decide either to continue the Verdun offensive with sufficient forces or to break off the battle and try elsewhere.[80]

This analysis has advanced a different interpretation of Falkenhayn's strategy at Verdun. It has used the evidence found in the KGFA files to demonstrate how the General Staff Chief intended to utilize the operational lessons of the war up to 1916 to apply attrition on the battlefield, showing that Falkenhayn was not irresolute, but rather he was forced to change his ideas as the battle progressed. It has proved that his goal at

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[76] Wendt, op.cit., pp. 243-244; Der Weltkrieg X, p.405.
[77] Georg Wetzell, "Konnte im Jahre 1916 deutscherseits eine Kriegsentscheidung angestrebt werden und war der Gedanke, sie bei Verdun zu suchen, berechtigt?" (Paper presented at the Reichswehrministerium, 1926) unpublished manuscript in BA/MA, W10/51528.
[78] Der Weltkrieg X, pp. 661ff.
[79] Ibid., p.671f.
[80] Ibid., p.674. While Falkenhayn's recent most biographer, Holger Afflerbach, recognizes that Falkenhayn's aim from the start of the offensive was the *Verblutung* of the French, he sidesteps the question of Falkenhayn's supposed changing of aims as the battle progressed. See Afflerbach, op.cit., pp. 373ff.

the campaign's start and, indeed, throughout the battle was, in fact, the *Verblutung* of the French army.[81]

Falkenhayn had good reasons for seeking this goal. Contrary to some views, it was his attempt to overcome the strategic and tactical challenges of the great *Volkskrieg* that was the First World War.[82] The conditions of this war made a breakthrough and a mobile, decisive campaign impossible. Falkenhayn had to find another way to convince the French that the war could not be won and that the only sensible solution was a negotiated peace with Germany. His method of achieving this was to construct an approach from the war's operational lessons that aimed at inflicting unacceptable damage upon the French. As difficult as it is to comprehend today, his strategy to accomplish this was the *Verblutung* of the French army. Verdun was to be the first method of accomplishing this and an Entente counter-offensive was to be the second. These were to be followed, if necessary, by a German offensive to defeat the remainder of the Entente armies in the field.

However, his strategy faltered on a number of levels. Although he had correctly chosen a point for which the French would thrown in every available man, the General Staff Chief had, not for the first time, underestimated his enemy. The will of the French army, government, and people was far stronger than had been anticipated. The war had already demanded great sacrifices of the French nation and this meant that Falkenhayn's goal of a negotiated peace would be unlikely. The will to continue the war to a victorious end at all costs allowed the all belligerents to absorb tremendous casualties. Although the French army was clearly suffering badly by the summer of 1916, it was able to maintain its morale and even contribute forces to the Somme offensive, thanks to the rotation system instituted by Pétain. Moreover, despite the pressure imposed on the French army, it was never close enough to collapse to force the British to launch an ill-prepared relief offensive. The enemy had clearly not reacted as Falkenhayn had anticipated.[83]

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[81] This goal was recognized even by observers at the time. See Hans Delbrück, "Kriegsereignisse im März," PJ 25 March 1916, reprinted in Krieg und Politik, 1914-1916 (Berlin: Georg Stilke, 1918) pp. 222ff.

[82] Michael Geyer, "German Strategy in the Age of Machine Warfare, 1914-1945," in Peter Paret, ed. The Makers of Modern Strategy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) p.536.

[83] Hermann Ziese-Beringer's argument that the Verdun offensive caused the French army mutinies in 1917 clearly overstates the importance of Verdun in this event. The unsuccessful Nivelle offensives were the primary reason. See Der einsame Feldherr: Die Wahrheit über Verdun Vol.2 (Berlin: Frundsberg-Verlag, 1933). Cf. Wolfgang Foerster, "Falkenhayn – der einsame Feldherr?" Deutsche Wehr 17 January 1934, pp. 41-43.

Falkenhayn had also overestimated the German army's ability to inflict casualties upon their enemy. Although the Germans caused more casualties than they themselves took, the ratio was not the five Frenchmen killed to two Germans assumed by the OHL. In part, this was due to the tactical methods employed by the 5th Army. As their initial goals were more far-reaching than Falkenhayn's (i.e., the capture of the fortress), they pushed their units to attack regardless of casualties. Even after they had accepted the General Staff Chief's goal of "bleeding white" the French army, they applied costly tactics. Falkenhayn had been unable to impose his concept of "attritional" operations, with their emphasis on limited objectives, on the army, who continued for the most part to employ tactics more appropriate to *Bewegungskrieg* and *Vernichtungsstrategie*.

Further, the failure to seize the vital Meuse Heights made Falkenhayn's approach all the more difficult. If this terrain feature had been taken early in the battle, the Germans would have been in a reasonably secure defensive position. From there, the powerful German artillery would have been able to inflict a disproportionate number of casualties on the counter-attacking French, as the defensive battles of 1915 had shown. The failure to take the Heights had a profound effect on the battle. The 5th Army was compelled to carry out a number of further offensives purely to better the army's poor tactical position. At this point, the nature of how the French army was to be ground down also shifted. No longer would the attrition come solely from French counter-attacks as had been initially envisioned, now the attrition was also to come from German attacks and local French counter-attacks. This shift made it clear that the task of "bleeding white" the French army would not be as easy has the General Staff Chief had anticipated at the battle's outset.

This prolongation of the battle had two important consequences. First, now it became extremely difficult to give up the offensive without at least capturing Verdun. German prestige was now just as closely bound to the fate of the fortress as was that of the French. Second, it made an Entente relief offensive all the more important. By the middle of April, it was clear that the Verdun offensive would not lead to a rapid French capitulation. Therefore, to defeat an Entente relief offensive and to launch a counter-attack increasingly looked like the only way out of the stalemate. Thus, Falkenhayn looked forward with anticipation to the Entente offensive on the Somme. This, however, was to be the final nail in the coffin of *Ermattungsstrategie*. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian front and unexpected ferocity of the Anglo-French attack quickly ended any

ideas of a victorious German counter-attack. The German army was stretched merely to hold its positions on both fronts.

In fact, the severe strain imposed upon the German army by the battles of 1916 nearly brought it to collapse and certainly brought Falkenhayn's time as Chief of the General Staff to an end. By all accounts, the experience of 1916 caused not only the attrition of the French and German armies, but in Falkenhayn as well. He is described as being in broken health by the end of the summer 1916, and he never recovered from the experience and died an early death in 1922.[84] His dismissal brought his great rivals, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, to power. The duo from the east discarded Falkenhayn's *Ermattungsstrategie* and attempted instead to apply their ideas of *Vernichtungsstrategie* to the Western Front. The results are well known.

[84] See Afflerbach, op.cit., pp. 531ff.

Conclusion

As was noted at the beginning of this work, since the end of World War I, the term "attrition" has come to be associated with the futility of the war. Generals who practised the strategy have been labelled "butchers" and "donkeys." The concept of the strategy of attrition was called into further disrepute by America's use of the strategy during the Vietnam War. Since then, it has been shunned by military intellectuals and historians alike.[1] By using newly available sources to examine the intellectual underpinnings of Falkenhayn's conduct of World War I, this study has attempted to reassess the negative interpretations of *Ermattungsstrategie* and show the true intentions of Falkenhayn in what has been described as the most senseless battle of the entire war.

The thesis began by examining the changes in warfare demonstrated by the second phase of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71. The ability of the Republican government to raise and equip new armies after the complete defeat of the Imperial armies indicated to astute observers that the age of *Volkskrieg* had returned. As during the Revolutionary/Napoleonic Wars, the states of Europe began tapping deeply into the resources of their nation after the defeat of France in 1871 in order to ensure the safety of their borders. However, several aspects had changed between 1815 and 1870. Now, central governments were better organized and, hence, better able to exploit the resources of their respective nations. Moreover, the size of populations had grown considerably, allowing a manifold increase in the size of armies. Most importantly, industrialization had occurred throughout the Continent, and its fruits were harnessed by the growing armies of Europe.

To some observers, this trend, combined with the progress of the *Volkskrieg* of 1870/71, offered a serious challenge to prevailing strategic wisdom. Indeed, as Rudolf Stadelmann and Stig Förster have noted, the architect of the stunning German victories in the Wars of Unification, Helmuth von Moltke the Elder, recognized clearly the dangers

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[1] A notable exception to this outlook is the US Marine Corps' recent primer on strategy. Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-1, Strategy (Washington: Department of the Navy, 1996).

this shift in warfare posed for Germany.[2] Facing enemies who had created "nations in arms," Germany could no longer count on being able to defeat her enemies' armies totally. Consequently, Moltke doubted he would be able to repeat the events of the Wars of Unification, where Germany had been able to dictate terms to a beaten foe. This fear led him to institute changes in Germany's war plans. No longer did he assume that the army alone could produce a victory, Germany's diplomats would play a crucial role in securing a negotiated peace. Thus, the father of *Vernichtungsstrategie* himself saw its limitations and how its utility had diminished in the age of *Volkskrieg*.

At the same time that Moltke and others within the army were questioning the efficacy of a strategy of annihilation, Hans Delbrück was challenging it from his position as a civilian military commentator. He developed an alternative to the army's *Vernichtungsstrategie – Ermattungsstrategie*, or a strategy of attrition. Although this theory was historically based, it was clearly intended to be applicable to the contemporary situation, where it looked increasingly unlikely that a war could be won quickly and decisively. Delbrück, like Moltke the Elder, envisioned a strategy that closely linked civilian political goals with achievable military ones. The result would not be a campaign with the great "decisive" battles favored by the many in the army, but rather a war that resulted in a negotiated peace after great exertion by both sides.

As most historical literature has shown, this strategy was firmly rejected by the majority of the Wilhelmine army.[3] This thesis has attempted to give some alternative reasons for why this was so. Most soldiers, then and now, were offended by the indecisiveness implicit in Delbrück's *Ermattungsstrategie*. To the soldiers of the day, the Wars of Unification offered compelling proof that a swift decisive victory was indeed possible.[4] The industrial mass armies which followed these wars certainly challenged this

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[2] Rudolf Stadelmann, Moltke und der Staat (Krefeld: Scherpe Verlag, 1950); Stig Förster "Facing 'People's War': Moltke the Elder and Germany's Military Options after 1871," Journal of Strategic Studies Vol.10 Nr.2 (1987) pp. 209-230; and Idem, "Der deutsche Generalstab und die Illusion des kurzen Krieges, 1871-1914. Metakritik eines Mythos," MGM 54 (1995) pp. 61-95.

[3] See particularly, Jehuda Wallach, The Dogma of the Battle of Annihilation: The Theories of Clausewitz and Schlieffen and Their Impact on the German Conduct of Two World Wars (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1986); Arden Bucholz, Hans Delbrück and the German Military Establishment: War Images in Conflict (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1985); Sven Lange, Hans Delbrück und der 'Strategiestreit': Kriegführung und Kriegsgeschichte in der Kontroverse 1879-1914 (Einzelschriften zur Militärgeschichte No. 40 Herausgegeben vom Militärgeschichtlichen Forschungsamt) (Freiburg: Rombach Verlag, 1995).

[4] Indeed, much of the current historiography stresses the decisiveness of the wars. For example, see Geoffrey Wawro, The Austro-Prussian War: Austria's War with Prussia and Italy in 1866 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); and Michael Howard, The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-1871 (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961). While the Austro-Prussian War deserves this

approach. However, for a variety of reasons, the strategic leaders who followed Moltke the Elder believed the changed nature of warfare did not rule out a rapid German victory. Rather than being slaves to a specific strategic vision as is often asserted,[5] Germany's military leaders recognized the dangers facing Germany. However, they looked carefully at Germany's strategic position and the advantages that they had over their enemies and rejected following Delbrück's *Ermattungsstrategie*. They assumed their army to be much more skilful at warfare than their opponents, an edge they intended to exploit to the fullest. This could only be exploited by fighting a war offensively. Further, Schlieffen and Moltke the Younger paid close attention to Germany's strategic situation. In this, Russia played a crucial role. When Schlieffen wrote his famous plan, the Russian army had proved itself incompetent and did not look likely to recover any time in the foreseeable future. Thus, Germany had an opportunity to concentrate the bulk of her forces against France. For Moltke the Younger, on the other hand, the growing strength of Russia meant that Germany had to defeat France quickly in order to be able to defend herself against Russia. Thus, to Schlieffen and Moltke, not only did *Ermattungsstrategie* offend their military sensibilities, it did not seem to make sense given Germany's strategic situation.

However, the events of late summer 1914 proved Moltke the Elder and Hans Delbrück right. The failure of Germany's war plan also represented the failure of *Vernichtungsstrategie*. The new General Staff Chief, Erich von Falkenhayn, understood that Germany just did not have the resources to defeat her enemies in a rapid, decisive campaign.[6] Instead, as this thesis has shown, he embraced the ideas of Moltke and Delbrück and adopted *Ermattungsstrategie* as his new course.[7] Under Falkenhayn's leadership, Germany attempted to end the war not with a peace dictated by Germany, but rather through a negotiated peace, albeit on terms favorable to Germany.

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reputation, the Franco-Prussian War certainly does not. For example of alternative views, see Stig Förster and Jörg Nagler, eds. On the Road to Total War: The American Civil War and the German Wars of Unification, 1861-1871 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[5] Wallach, op.cit., pp. 35-68, passim; Stephan van Evera, "The Cult of the Offensive and the Origins of the First World War," International Security Vol.9 Nr.1 (Summer 1984) pp. 58-107.

[6] See Holger Afflerbach, Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich (Munich: R.Oldenbourg Verlag, 1994) pp. 198ff and passim; Holger Herwig, The First World War: Germany and Austria-Hungary, 1914-1918 (London: Arnold, 1997) p.116f.

[7] See Hans Delbrück, "Falkenhayn und Ludendorff," PJ Bd.180 (1920) pp. 249-281; and his testimony to the *Parlamentarischer Untersuchungsausschuß*, Albrecht Philipp, ed. Die Ursachen des Deutschen Zusammenbruchs im Jahre 1918 Band 3 (Berlin: Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft für Politik und Geschichte, 1925) pp. 239-271, passim.

Falkenhayn, however, faced the problem of implementing this strategy. In this, he ran up against the two major, mutually supporting difficulties of World War I. First, on the strategic level, the war permitted governments to exploit even further the manpower and industrial resources of their nations. Thus, they were able to maintain huge armies in the field, spread across the Continent of Europe. Losses could be made good by the large populations, and when manpower became scarce, unexploited areas of society, such as female labor, could be tapped into. The armies of World War I could not simply be swept away, as they had been in the past. On the tactical level, the killing power of these industrial mass armies meant that even tactical successes eluded World War I generals. Thus, they first had to find a solution to the tactical deadlock before any strategic solution could be found.

Falkenhayn recognized these difficulties clearly. Thus, throughout 1915, he attempted different solutions. Ever believing that the war would be decided in France, he initially planned to execute a breakthrough of the Western Front, which would force the Western Allies apart and hopefully lead to peace negotiations. However, the desperate situation of Germany's ally forced Falkenhayn to turn his attentions eastward in spring 1915. Once involved in the east, he sought, with no success, to force Russia into a separate peace. In the meantime, the *Westheer* stood firm against powerful Entente offensives.

Although no decision was reached during 1915, there was much to be learned from operations during the year. While the campaign in Russia had suggested that a breakthrough might be possible given the proper tools, the fighting on the Western Front suggested otherwise. Upon further examination, contrary to the beliefs of OberOst and many historians since, the combat in the east showed that, in fact, strategic breakthroughs had not occurred.[8] Instead, the tactical German breakthroughs resulted in the Russian army withdrawing and re-establishing a defensive line further to the rear. This process, however, caused the severe attrition of the Russian army. This experience in the east, combined with the lessons of operations on the Western Front, suggested that a similar process might be possible in France.

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[8] Herbert Rosinski, for instance, argued that "a mobile form of strategy" was still able to be carried out in the east throughout the war. Herbert Rosinski, The German Army (Washington: The Infantry Journal, 1940) p.91f.

By late 1915, the General Staff Chief was convinced that the war would have to be concluded by the end of 1916, or else the Central Powers would have exhausted their resources. A way had to be found to accelerate the process of wearing down the will and resources of the Entente to force at least one enemy to the peace table. Operations in Russia and in France suggested an approach which was to develop into the application of attrition to the battlefield at Verdun, and from these operations Falkenhayn developed his unique strategy for winning the war. His approach attempted to deal simultaneously with the two great difficulties of World War I. The General Staff Chief accepted that a breakthrough was impossible due to the defensive power of modern weapons. Therefore, he attempted to utilize this power to his own ends. Falkenhayn intended to force the French to "bleed themselves white" in counter-attacks to a successful German attack with limited objectives, and thereby deal with the French reserves and break the French will and ability to resist. The strategic problem of French manpower reserves was to be solved on the tactical level using the very weapons which created the tactical deadlock.

Falkenhayn had, indeed, chosen his target well. The French were more than willing to sacrifice their soldiers to retain the fortress of Verdun. However, the plan broke down in its execution. Although to accomplish the gruesome task of killing off French manpower he had accumulated a vast park of heavy artillery, the 5th Army was unable to reach the positions necessary to accomplish their mission safely. Thus, the battle degenerated into a slogging match, where the German army, despite the beliefs of the OHL, was worn down almost as greatly as the French. The General Staff Chief had both underestimated the strength of French willpower and overestimated the killing ability of the German army. Falkenhayn was unable to inflict enough casualties upon the French to force them to sue for peace.

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The failure of the strategy of attrition at Verdun begs several questions. First, does the failure of Falkenhayn's strategy there demonstrate that *Ermattungsstrategie* is a false approach? Second, was there an alternative available to Germany during World War I?

In answering the first, it should be remembered that the ultimate Entente victory did not come as a result of a great battle, rather Germany surrendered because she was

exhausted after 4 years of hard fighting. The ability of her army to continue the struggle had been severely undermined by the losses sustained over numerous inconclusive battles. The lack of success, particularly the failure of Ludendorff's spring 1918 offensives, caused the rank and file to despair of ultimate victory, and, as Wilhelm Deist has shown, to vote with their feet.[9] However, it was not only the common soldier who tired of the war. Ultimately, the will of Germany's strategic leadership to continue to war collapsed as well. It was Ludendorff, after all, who called for the armistice.

However, despite the fact that Germany succumbed in the end to the *Ermattungsstrategie* of her enemies, Germans and many historians of the German army rejected the approach. Throughout the war, the German army had certainly believed an alternative was available, and this belief continued even after the war. Most German officers had never accepted the eclipse of *Vernichtungsstrategie*. The successes of Hindenburg and Ludendorff in the east suggested to them that this approach could still work, even under the vastly altered strategic conditions of World War I. They conveniently overlooked the fact that Russia was not, in the end, defeated in a great, decisive battle as Hindenburg and Ludendorff desired. Instead, Russia was brought down by internal unrest caused by the strain of a long and indecisive war.[10] Indeed, even when Hindenburg and Ludendorff attempted to apply their ideas to the west, the result was dismal failure. Despite great tactical success in the spring 1918 offensives, the Germans could not bring an end to the war.

The Reichsarchiv and a group of like-minded writers together formed what could be labelled as the "Schlieffen School."[11] These writers were intent on preventing another indecisive war like World War I. Accordingly, they looked back to the ideas supposedly advanced by Schlieffen to illustrate how the war should have been fought. Rather than acknowledge the false assumptions upon which the *Vernichtungsstrategie* practised by Hindenburg and Ludendorff was based, the Schlieffen School looked to the various German commanders for the reasons for Germany's defeat. In doing so, they blamed the shortcomings of a particular commander for Germany's problems. Thus, the Schlieffen

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[9] Wilhelm Deist, "The Military Collapse of the German Empire: The Reality Behind the Stab-in-the-Back Myth," (trans. E.J. Feuchtwanger) War in History Vol.3 Nr.2 (1996).
[10] Norman Stone, The Eastern Front, 1914-1917 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975) pp. 282ff.
[11] See Wallach, op.cit., pp. 209-228; Annika Mombauer, Helmuth von Moltke and the German General Staff: Military and Political Decision-Making in Imperial Germany, 1906-1916 (University of Sussex, DPhil Thesis, 1997) pp. 250ff.

Plan failed not because of its faults but because Moltke the Younger had not fully understood Schlieffen's concept. Falkenhayn and his strategy were treated similarly.

The Reichsarchiv painted Falkenhayn as an irresolute commander, who, like his predecessor Moltke the Younger, had not understood the principles taught by Schlieffen.[12] In keeping with their rejection of the fact that *Vernichtungsstrategie* had ceased to be a viable strategy during the war, post-war German writers sought to deny that Falkenhayn was an *Ermattungstratege*. Instead, Falkenhayn made the choices that he did because he lacked the strength of will to decide upon a single course of action which would risk everything on a powerful, war-winning blow.[13] Wilhelm Groener's words are representative of this school of thought:

> Wer den General v.F[alkenhayn] bei seiner Arbeit als Generalstabschef beobachten konnte, hat immer wieder beklagen müssen, dass sonst so kluge Mann nie eine grosse operative Idee mit weitem Ziel gefunden und daran alle verfügbaren Kräfte gesetzt hat, sondern stets sozusagen im Kleinen stecken blieb. Für diese Operationen hat F[alkenhayn] selbst die Formel 'vom beschränkten Ziel' gebraucht, und dazu hat er noch unzureichende Kräfte angesetzt.[14]

To the Reichsarchiv and others, Falkenhayn's supposed failings as a commander, rather than the strategy he followed, contributed greatly to Germany's defeat.

To the writers of this school, the campaign at Verdun was the ultimate example of Falkenhayn's indecisiveness. Rather than set all of Germany's reserves against the fortress, capture it, and effect a rupture in the French defensive system, Falkenhayn had attacked this strong point with only eight divisions. Further, he starved the 5th Army of reserves during the crucial early stages of the operations, holding fresh divisions to defend against a phantom Entente relief offensive. To make matters worse, Falkenhayn fed reinforcements to the 5th Army piecemeal, which served to continue the operation, but which were not enough to bring a decision. Although the questioning of Falkenhayn's intentions at Verdun was fairly muted in Der Weltkrieg, the director of the

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[12] This idea, raised during the war, became a common refrain after the war. See Hans von Haeften, quoted in Ekkehart P. Guth, "Der Gegensatz zwischen dem Oberbefehlshaber Ost und dem Chef des Generalstabes des Feldheeres 1914/15: Die Rolle des Majors v. Haeften im Spannungsfeld zwischen Hindenburg, Ludendorff und Falkenhayn," MGM 1/84 p.90. For post-war usage, see Wolfgang Foerster, Graf Schlieffen und der Weltkrieg (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1925) p.86.

[13] For example, see Reichsarchiv, Der Weltkrieg Bd.X: Die Operationen des Jahres 1916 (Berlin: ES Mittler, 1936) pp. 661ff.; Max Bauer, Der grosse Krieg in Feld und Heimat (Tübingen: Osiander'sche Buchhandlung, 1921); Wilhelm Groener, "Protokoll über die 890. Sitzung der Mittwochsgesellschaft von 1864," 11 January 1933, USNA, M-137, Roll 13.

[14] Wilhelm Groener, "Die Strategie Falkenhayns," Vortrag in der Mittwochsgesellschaft, 29 May 1935, USNA, Groener Papers, Microform Series M-137, Roll 13.

KGFA, Wolfgang Foerster, published a semi-official article challenging Falkenhayn's statement that he had intended from the campaign's beginning to fight a battle of attrition.[15]

The interpretations of the Reichsarchiv and the writers of the Schlieffen School have had great influence over the course of historiography. For example, B.H. Liddell Hart's view of Falkenhayn could have been written by one of Falkenhayn's most bitter opponents: "He was the ablest and most scientific general – 'penny-wise and pound-foolish' – who ever ruined his country by a refusal to take calculated risks. Limitation of risks led to liquidation."[16] Further, the Reichsarchiv's questioning of Falkenhayn's initial goals in the Battle of Verdun has allowed confusion over these goals to continue to this day.[17]

The fresh examination of the evidence undertaken in this study has revised this harsh opinion of Falkenhayn and *Ermattungsstrategie* and has shown that given the strategic and tactical realities of the day, Germany did not have any other choice but to follow this strategy, despite the strident assertions of the Schlieffen School. Moreover, it is hoped that, through the use of recently discovered evidence to examine in detail the planning for and the conduct of the Battle of Verdun, this thesis has shown Falkenhayn did indeed intend to fight a battle of attrition.

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[15] Wolgang Foerster's "Falkenhayns Plan für 1916. Ein Beitrag zur Frage: Wie gelangt man aus dem Stellungskriege zu entscheidungsuchender Operation?" MWR Jg.1937 pp. 304-330. Cf. Der Weltkrieg X, pp.671f.

[16] B.H. Liddell Hart, Reputations (London: John Murray, 1928) p.78. Liddell Hart titled his essay on Falkenhayn, "Erich von Falkenhayn: The Extravagance of Prudence." In fact, Liddell Hart seems to have drawn heavily on Max Bauer's Der grosse Krieg in Feld und Heimat.

[17] This argument has most recently been advanced by Gerd Krumeich, "'Saigner la France'? Mythes et réalité de la stratégie allemande de la bataille de Verdun," Guerres mondiale et conflits contemporains Nr.182 (April 1996) pp. 17-29.

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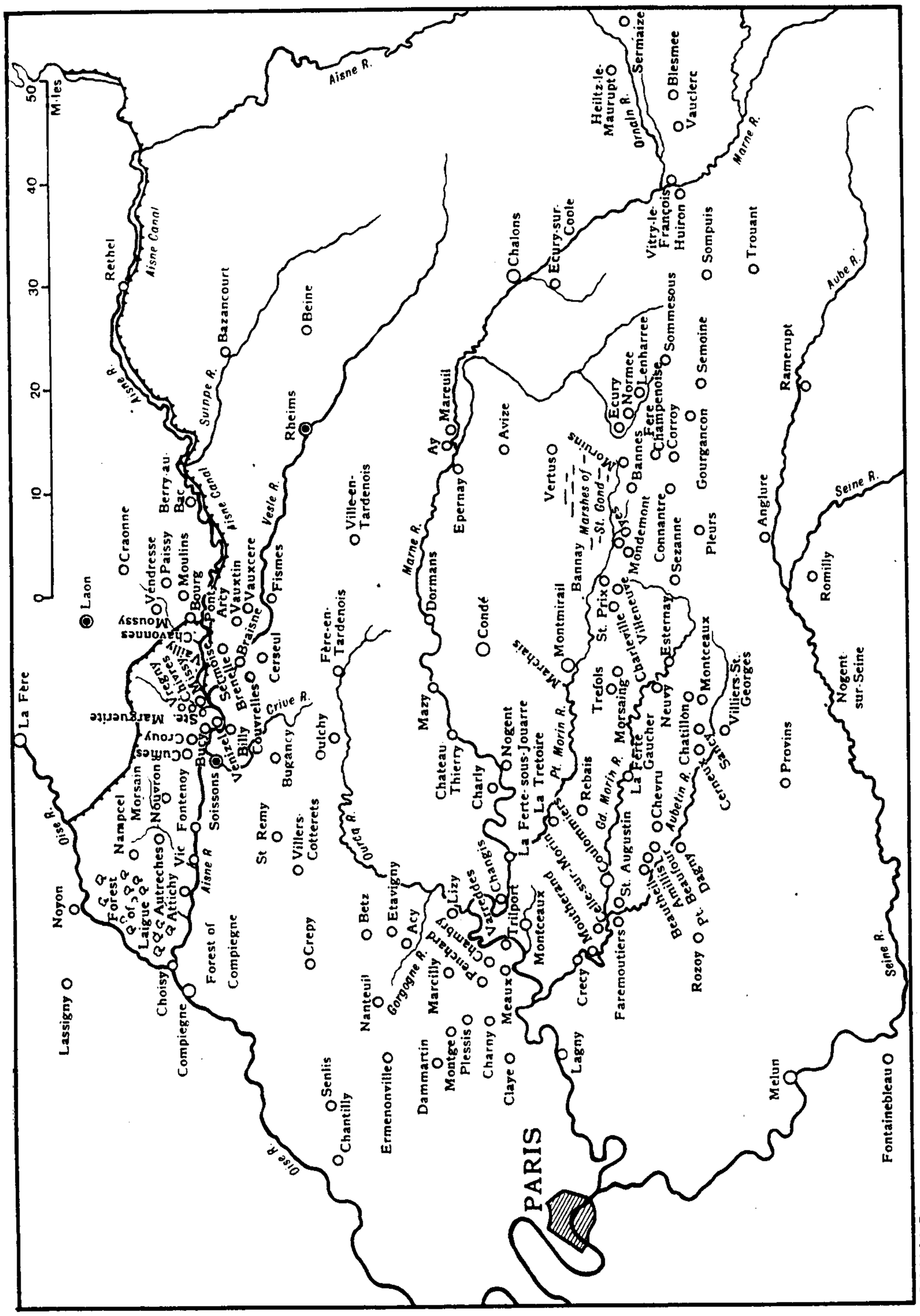
Abbreviations:

HZ: Historische Zeitschrift
PJ: Preußische Jahrbücher
MGM: Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen
M-W: Militär-Wochenblatt
MWR: Militär-Wissenschaftliche Rundschau
WWR: Wehr-Wissenschaftliche Rundschau
WuW: Wissen und Wehr
ZfPGL: Zeitschrift für preußische Geschichte und Landeskunde

Map 1:
"The Rhine Basin"

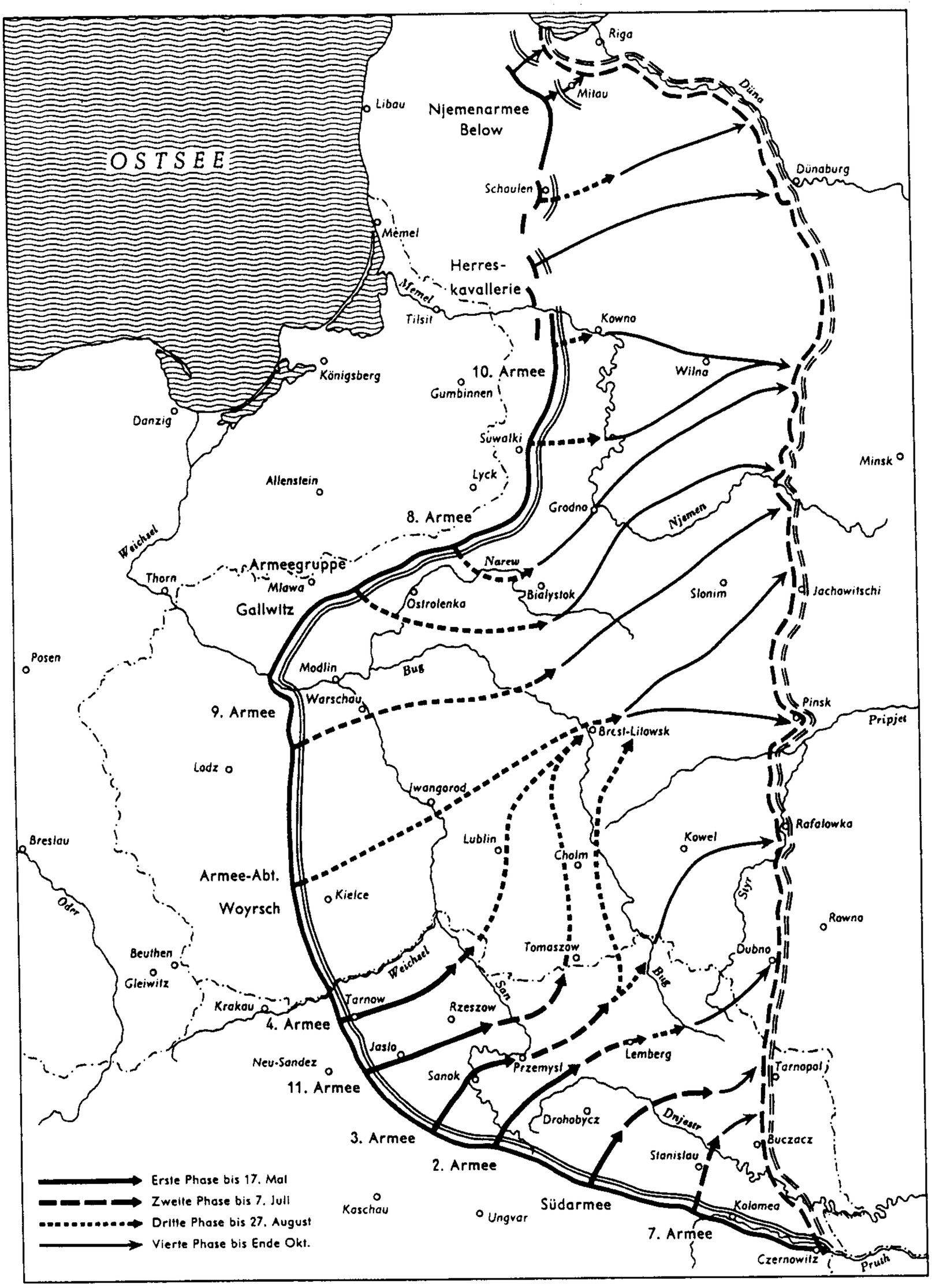
Source: Hew Strachan, ed.
The Oxford Illustrated History of the First World War
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

Map 2:
"The Marne and the Aisne Area"



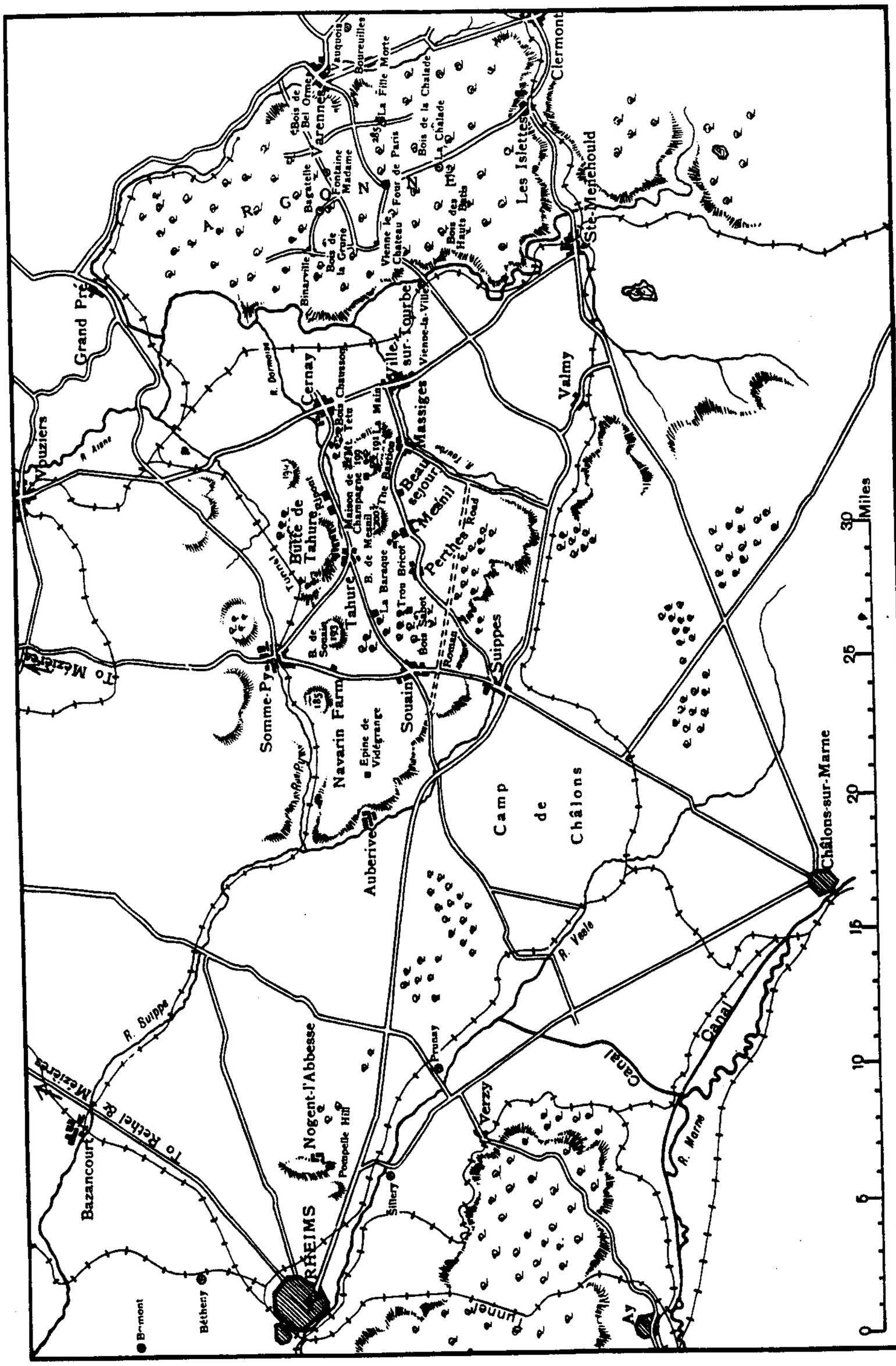
Source:
Nelson's Map Book of the World Wide War
(London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, n.d.)

Map 3:
"The Eastern Front, 1915"



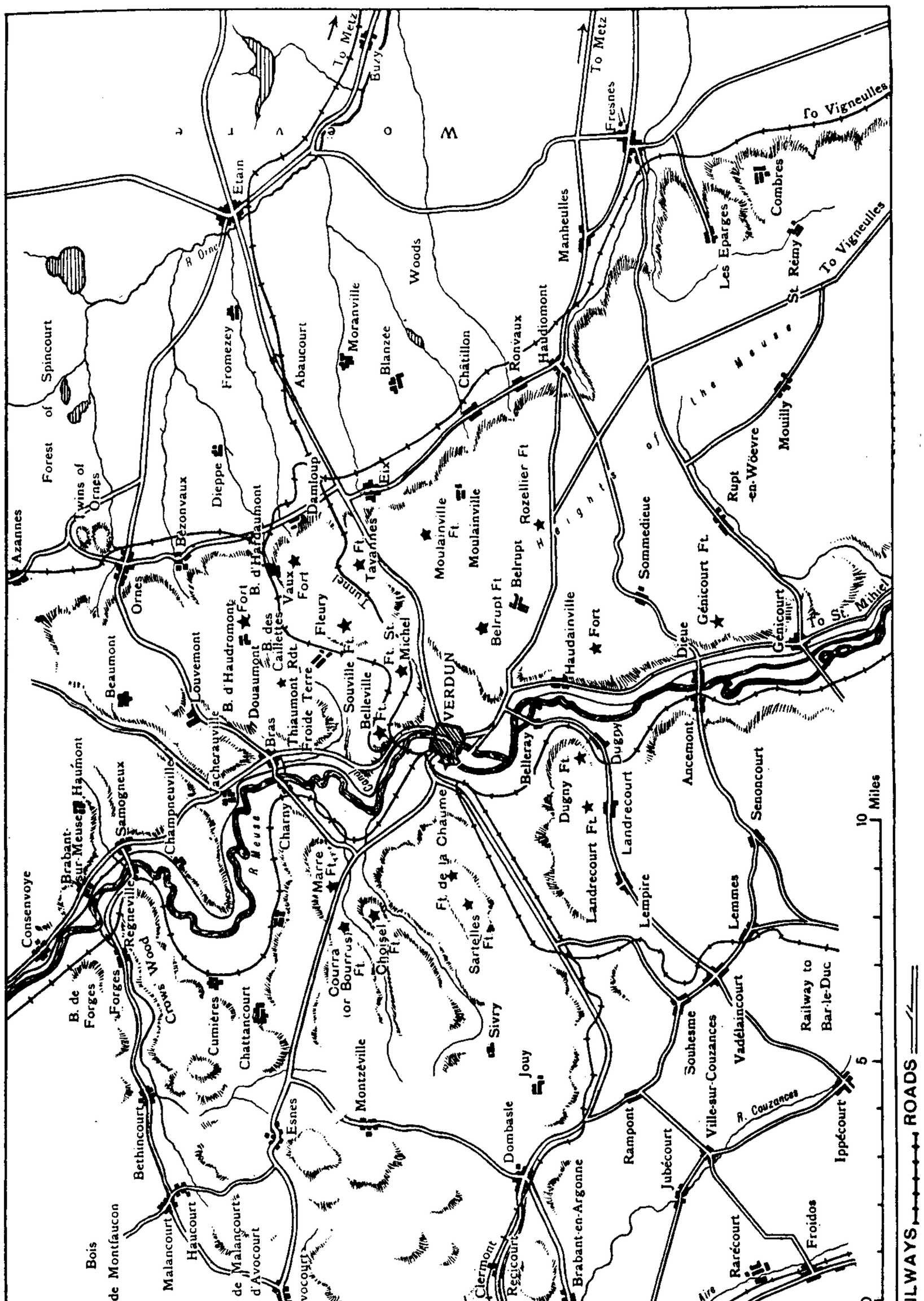
Source: Hans Dollinger, ed.
Der Erste Weltkrieg
(Munich: Verlag Kurt Desch, 1965)

Map 4:
"Champagne and the Argonne"



Source:
Nelson's Map Book of the World Wide War
(London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, n.d.)

Map 5:
"The Verdun Area"



Source:
Nelson's Map Book of the World Wide War
(London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, n.d.)